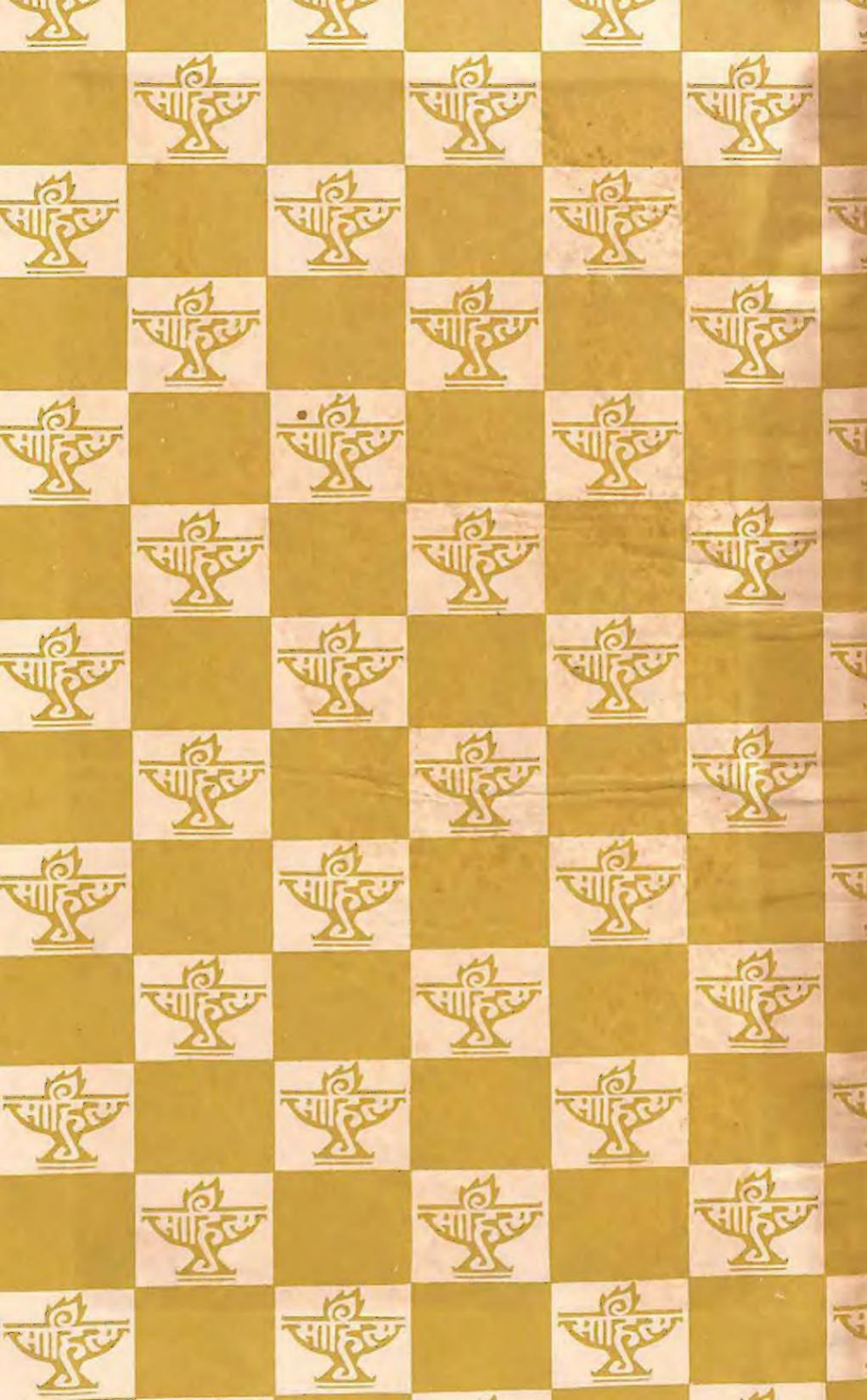
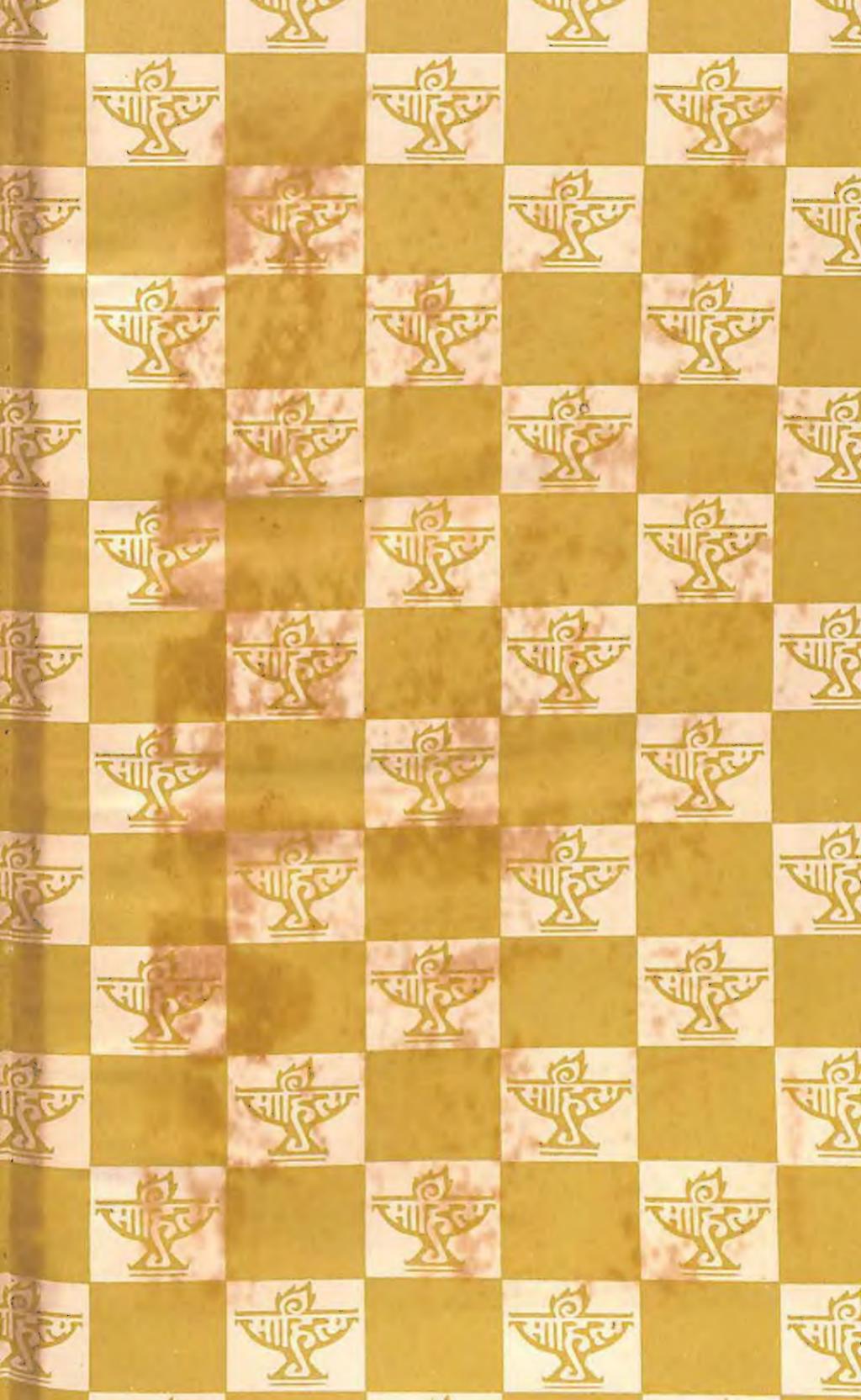


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Short Stories

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Short Stories



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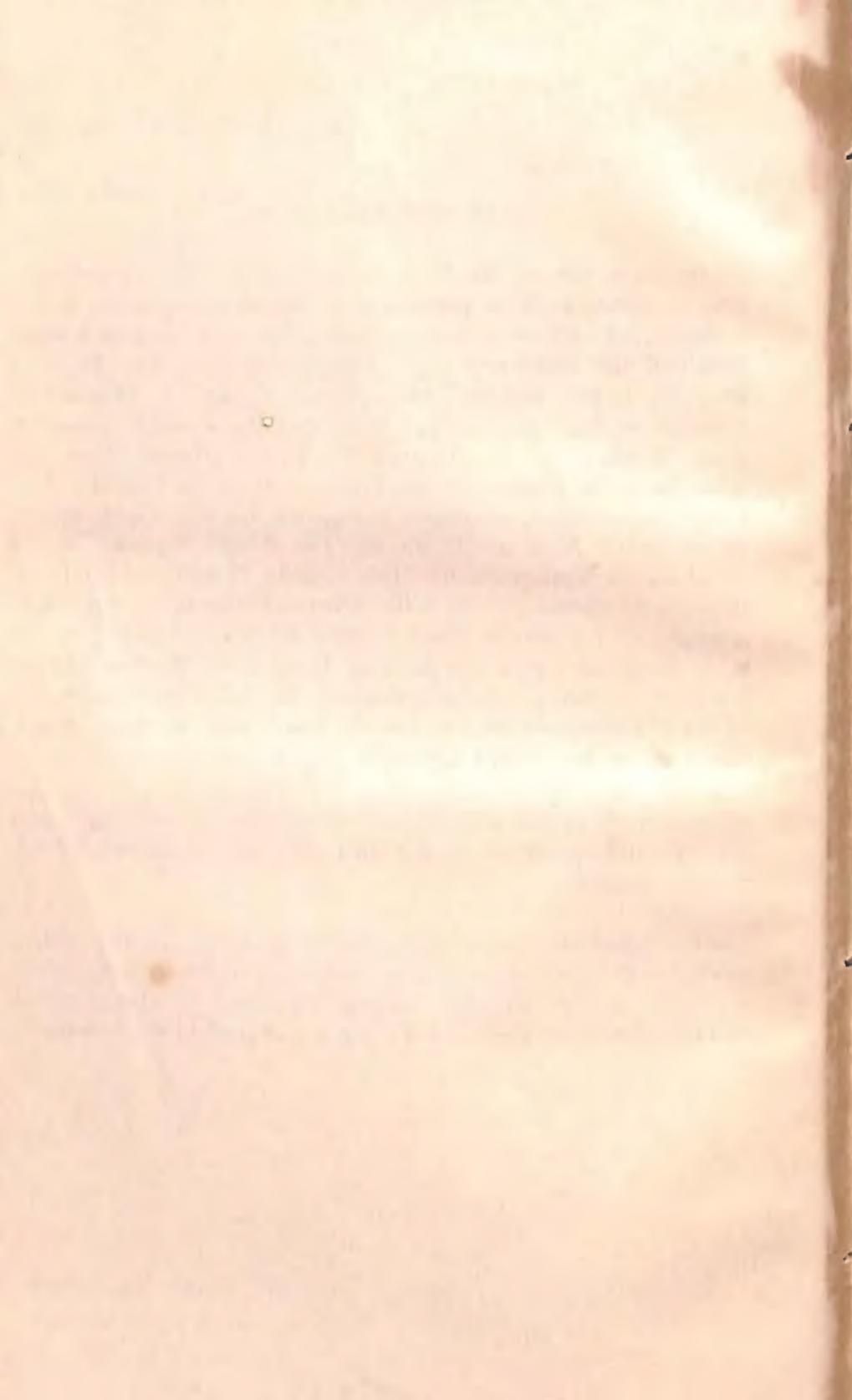
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FOREWORD

STORYTELLING is as old as man. It certainly antedates writing and probably emerged as soon as man was able to convey ideas and emotions through sounds that had become fixed as words. Its first form must have been the embellishment of incidents of experience, and from this it was a short step to describe imaginative happenings. It served to amuse, entertain and educate not only the young but also the adult and soon became one of the favourite pastimes of moments of leisure for men and women alike.

The didactic element became predominant quite early and except for tales of wit and humour, or those meant for children, stories generally centred round some religious or moral theme. As society became more organised with the evolution of the State, the emphasis shifted to stories of heroic or amorous adventures of kings and princes. Almost all stories of these earlier days however lacked similitude and truth of nature. It was thus left to a more self-conscious and sophisticated society to develop the story in the modern sense.

In India, as elsewhere, the short story is a phenomenon of comparatively recent origin. It is true that we have in Sanskrit fables which later became the model of Aesop's fables in Greece. We have long and romantic stories of the loves and adventures of gods and goddesses and kings and princes. There are also stories of merchants and courtesans which prove the existence of a highly developed and sophisticated society. Nevertheless, all such tales were only precursors and the short story in the proper sense developed in India only in the modern age and mainly as a result of the impact of Europe.

It is perhaps not surprising that this impact was felt first and most deeply in Bengal. The British establishments in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were founded at about the same time, but Calcutta soon became the capital of the East India Company

and the centre of European influence in India. Besides, the impact on Bombay was originally more in respect of commerce and on Madras in respect of religion, while that on Calcutta was mainly in the field of education and culture. The result was an early efflorescence of literature in Bengal which in course of time influenced the growth of literature in other Indian languages. The Western influence thus permeated throughout India both directly and also at second hand through the influence of Bengal. Within a hundred years of the Battle of Plassey, Bengal had already been influenced profoundly by Western literature and art. In another fifty years, the whole of India showed marks of a new awakening as a result of the impact of the West.

The short story in India is one of the results of this new awakening of the Indian mind. What distinguishes the modern short story from earlier forms is its emphasis on character as opposed to reportage. Stories in ancient and medieval India were more concerned with events and plot than with character or individuality. The situation changed in Europe by the middle of the 18th Century. With the rise of industrialism, there was an increasing awareness of the individual, and the novel and the short story emerged as distinct forms of art. The Indian short story was born when the impact of Europe was felt in the wake of the establishment of British power in India.

The earliest influence on Indian fiction was perhaps that of Sir Walter Scott. He influenced not only the larger novel, but also the shorter stories which were often indistinguishable from the novel except in length. There was no attempt at this stage to develop the short story as a distinct and unique form of art. This came later and the short story began to show greater interest in a situation or an aspect of character as against the novel's concern with the growth of character. If a novel attempts to reflect life in its totality, short stories offer only a vignette or still life picture of reality.

As in so many other fields, here also the pioneer was Rabindranath Tagore. He is the first writer of India who gave a distinct character to the short story. He is not only the first but also the

foremost and one of the greatest masters of the short story that the world has known. He has described his short stories as the life of Bengal seen through the window of his moving boat. He suggests that there is no completeness or totality in the short story since the view is only from a window. He also suggests that since the boat is moving, characters and events in them are seen only for a fleeting moment.

Tagore's influence was not confined to Bengal alone. His recognition in the Western world gave a new dignity to the Indian writer. In almost every Indian language, there emerged writers who tried their hand at every form of literature. They were often directly influenced by the example of Bengal, but they all shared in the inspiration derived from the Western world. In the case of Bengal, the dominant influence had at first been English literature. Since the development of the short story in the other Indian languages was somewhat later in time, they were influenced not only by English but other European literatures as well. By the end of the 19th Century, French influence on Indian writers was already becoming perceptible. In particular, the influence of Maupassant on the form of the short story continually increased. From the beginning of the present century, the Russian masters began to influence some of the best writers of the day. Temperament is one of the most important characteristics of the Russian novel or short story. Temperament is also one of the marked features of Indian writing. The brooding, mystic and introverted mentality of the Russian masters has evoked a strong sense of kinship in many of the finest Indian writers of today. Chekov has with Maupassant shared the honour of moulding the form as well as the content of contemporary Indian short stories.

The influence of English literature is still strong, but from the twenties of the present Century, the Continental influence has been increasing in strength. The French and the Russian masters were joined by some of the dominant figures of Norway and Sweden. Soon after came the influence of German, Italian and Spanish writers, and in very recent years, the technique of American short stories has also been increasingly felt.

Apart from the great novelists and story writers, two thinkers of Europe have also made a deep imprint on the mind of contemporary Indian writers. Freud was for some years worshipped almost as a demi-god. It became the fashion to delve into the unconscious and the subconscious to look for new subjects and themes. The Freudian influence on Indian literature was soon equalled and at times exceeded by that of Marx. Some story writers and novelists became proclaimed Marxists and attracted greater attention for their social and political views than for their craftsmanship. Though the outlooks of Freud and Marx are in some ways incompatible, there are Indian writers who are simultaneously Freudians and Marxists. While there is no denying that the impact of Freud and Marx has led to a deepening of sympathies and imagination, it has to be admitted that much of the new writing inspired by them is of only ephemeral interest.

The present anthology of contemporary Indian short stories attempts to give through English translations a cross-section of Indian literature at the present time. There is only one story selected from each of fifteen Indian languages. The Constitution of India has given special recognition to fourteen languages, of which Sanskrit is one. The present anthology does not include a story from Sanskrit, but has included one story each from Sindhi and English, which though not mentioned in the relevant section of the Constitution, have been recognised by the Sahitya Akademi as languages in which also Indians are making their contribution to the world of letters.

The main purpose of this anthology is to give to readers in one language some idea of the quality of literature in other Indian languages. Some may ask why English was chosen as the medium of communication for Indians speaking different languages. The answer is that English is still for most educated Indians the second language par excellence. Next to their mother-tongue, they feel more at home in it than in any other language, Indian or foreign, modern or classical. It is however intended that there will be translations of this anthology into every one of the major Indian languages so as to reach a far wider public. Translation into English has also the advantage

of introducing the writers to an audience outside India. It is therefore hoped that this anthology will serve the dual purpose of cultural exchanges within India and the introduction of an aspect of Indian culture to the world outside.

The omission of Tagore from this selection will strike even a casual reader. This omission is deliberate as it was felt that of all Indian writers, Tagore is the one who is most widely known outside his own language group. In fact, his fame is no longer merely Indian, but universal. Bengal is represented in this anthology by one of the immediate successors of Tagore who first made his name with stories about the experience of Indian students abroad. In the case of other Indian languages, some of the recognised masters have been included, as they are not so well known as Tagore.

It is obvious that selection of only one story from any of the major Indian languages cannot give an adequate idea of the wealth of its literature. Each of them has a rich and varied output and perhaps the richest crop is in the field of the novel and short stories. Many different traditions and tendencies are at work in each of the major Indian languages. In fact, if all the fifteen stories in this volume had been selected from one major Indian language alone, critics could still have complained that many outstanding pieces have been left out. Where the choice is restricted to only one story, it is obvious that there can be no question of reflecting the variety or wealth of short stories in the language concerned.

The only justification for limiting the choice to one story in each language is the limitation of space. Where fifteen or more languages are to be represented, even three stories from each would have made the volume larger than it was possible to manage at present. It may also be frankly stated that the selection of the story has from the nature of the case been arbitrary. Where only one story from a language was to be included, it was obviously impossible to satisfy all tastes. There is no critic in the world who can point to a single work of art and say that it is the best specimen of its kind. Different persons have

different tastes and standards. Even the same person may react differently at different times to the same work of art. All this makes the business of selection difficult and precarious. It may however be said in favour of this anthology that no story has been included except on the advice of some of the best critics in the language concerned.

One thing will perhaps strike the reader of this anthology with an immediate force. The themes of the stories are different and the treatment by the authors also shows wide divergences. Some exalt traditional virtues, while others are influenced by the emergence of new values of the contemporary world. The style of a writer cannot be easily conveyed through a translation but it is yet apparent that these writers show a wide variety of style. In spite of all these differences in language, style, treatment and theme, the stories are marked by a deep humanism that gives them a unity of spirit in the midst of all their diversity.

The final selection was made by Sri Krishna Kripalani, Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi, though he sought the advice of friends and critics in each language represented in the volume. There will naturally be difference of opinion about the selection. Fair and discerning students of each of the literatures represented here may complain that the piece selected is not the best specimen in their language. There may also be complaints about the quality of the translation. No anthology, and certainly no anthology of translations, can avoid such complaints. There can be no finality of judgement in art and least of all, in respect of contemporary writing. Translations add to the difficulty, for if they are too literal, they may become wooden. If on the other hand they are too free, they may miss the spirit of the original. To be faithful to the original and yet convey something of its flavour is not an easy task.

The only anthology that is completely satisfactory is the one which each man makes for himself. Even in the best of circumstances, he can do so for only his own or at most for one other language. Since no Indian can today claim equal competence in all the languages represented here, he will have to be content

with the judgement of competent critics in the languages concerned. He can also find satisfaction in the thought that the present anthology is only the first of a series of stories from different Indian languages to be published by the Sahitya Akademi. Anthologies of stories from one Indian language have been published before. One of them, *Green and Gold*, a selection of stories from Bengal has been well received in Britain, America, Germany and Italy. The Akademi and other bodies will soon be publishing other anthologies. Some of them will contain stories from only one while others will include stories from all Indian languages. Together, they will, it is hoped, give the reader in India and abroad some idea of the variety and vitality of the Indian literary tradition as well as the underlying unity of spirit which has characterised Indian civilisation throughout the ages.

New Delhi,
22 June, 1959.

HUMAYUN KABIR



Bhadari

SISHURAM was just returning from the field. He placed the plough in the courtyard and after a hurried bath changed his loin-cloth and hastened to the kitchen, where Bhadari, his wife was preparing the midday meal. Sishuram became indignant when he found that the rice had not yet been cooked and the curry too was not on fire. He saw that the *dhekya*¹ had not even been dressed for cooking; the *maida*² was lying on a plantain leaf like a dead peacock, and the *kai* fish lying on the floor looked like ash-besmeared³ fakirs intoxicated with puffs of hemp. On the other side, near the oven he saw Bhadari, blinded with smoke, blowing the fire.

Sishuram was fretting and fuming with anger when he found that the meal was not ready. From early morning a disputatious mood had possessed him. His anger had been steadily mounting to a climax for very many reasons. The day before, he had had to stop ploughing as it was a *Krishna Ekadasi*, a day forbidden for ploughing; this morning the bullocks had given him a lot of trouble in the field; besides, Sishuram had had a quarrel this very morning with his neighbour Bahua over an encroachment on his land. The quarrel had swollen in size and would have certainly exploded, but Bahua had been able to foresee the danger and had fled before the bubble burst. It is an age-old maxim that whenever one is angry one's rage is to be borne by one's wife. On a previous occasion also, when Sishuram had been vexed to a degree by the redoubtable Bahua, he had extinguished his anger by beating Bhadari on the ground that she had failed to feed the bul-

¹A kind of edible fern.

²A curved knife with a wooden handle.

³So that it may not slip away, the *kai* fish, before dressing, is besmeared with ashes.

locks on time.

Bhadari, like Mother Earth, patiently bore these onslaughts of her husband without a groan or a grumble. In fact, Bhadari had a firm conviction that these occasional beatings and chastisements were as natural as sleep and hunger — indispensable corollaries of married life. She sought her salvation through devotion to Sishuram.

But there is a limit to everything. Even Mother Earth, the embodiment of forbearance, sometimes gives a tremor. Would it therefore be unnatural if poor Bhadari should rise in revolt when things became intolerable?

Bhadari was exhausted with her efforts at blowing the smoky fire. Sishuram looked daggers at her and from a distance cried out excitedly, "Daughter of so and so, why have you not prepared the meal, can't you see it's late?" His face and his eyes were flushed red with anger.

Turning round from the smoke, Bhadari replied dryly, "Should I cook the food with my head? There is not a single log in the house. I am blowing myself out to kindle the fire with wet logs. Is it right simply to flare up without using your head a bit?" Her tired eyelids were weighted with drops of perspiration.

"What do you say, you daughter of a bitch?" roared Sishuram, and with a shrug of his shoulders he rushed towards Bhadari and struck her on the back with the *maida* that was lying on the floor. Before a second blow could be given, hearing Bhadari's heart-piercing shrieks, Kinaram, Sishuram's brother, came running in and immediately caught hold of his brother and dragged him outside. Poor Bhadari swooned, lying in a pool of blood.

Later on, Bhadari was sent to the hospital. On the third day, in the hospital, recovering her senses she turned her eyes about in the room, as if expecting some one beside the bed. The attendant came near and glanced at her; Bhadari in a low voice wistfully enquired, "Where is he?"

"Whom do you want?" asked the attendant.

A little nonplussed, Bhadari said, "My husband, Sir."

"Oh, that scoundrel? He is now in the lock-up."

"Let him come here, Sir!" Bhadari entreated pitifully.

"How can he come? He is now in the *hajat*.¹ Don't think about him. If you think about him, you may get worse."

Bhadari's eyes narrowed as she listened to the attendant and within a few seconds she again became unconscious. The doctor was informed; the attendant related the matter to him. The doctor realised that unless Sishuram was brought near, the patient might get worse. He made arrangements to keep Sishuram near Bhadari's bed, so that immediately on regaining consciousness she might see her husband.

Next morning, on coming to her senses, Bhadari saw Sishuram caressing her head and gently passing his finger through her hair. At the sight, her expression showed great relief, as if her husband's presence dissolved all her troubles. She smiled slowly and enquired: "How are you? Have you been taking your meals regularly? I am sure you are finding it hard to prepare your meals. Never mind, I shall be all right in a day or two. Kindly arrange to take me home: I'll come to your help." Two streams of tears gushed from Sishuram's eyes and rolled down his cheeks.

Bhadari, seeing the doctor coming near her bed, entreated, "My lord, my father, he is not to be blamed! He is innocent, guiltless; spare him; forgive him; I beseech you, forgive my husband. It was I who stumbled over the *maida* and hurt myself." Her eyes brimmed over with tears.

The doctor, the attendant and Sishuram were all struck dumb at these words of Bhadari's. Sishuram could no longer suppress his surging sorrow. He broke into a fit of anguish and wept like a child.

"It isn't true, Sir! It is I who struck her with the *maida*, and it is right that I should be hanged. My Lord, I am a sinner, I who stabbed my poor devoted wife," he added passionately.

Within a few weeks Bhadari's wounds healed and she was discharged from the hospital. But though she tried to shield Sishuram from the process of the law by attempting to prove his innocence, the law took its own course and Sishuram was sentenced to three months' hard labour. Sishuram went smi-

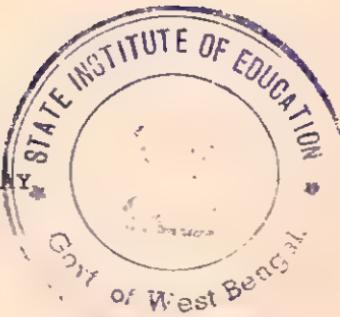
¹ Police custody.

ling to jail to atone for his sin.

Bhadari cursed her own unworthy self for the tragedy brought upon the life of her dear husband. No one could condemn her as severely as she condemned herself.

*Translated from the Original Assamese
by BIRINCHI KUMAR BARUA.*

PRABHAT KUMAR MUKHOPADHYAY



The Price of Flowers

VEGETARIAN restaurants are to be found in various parts of London. One day I tired myself out walking around the National Gallery looking at pictures. It was nearly one o'clock and I was feeling extremely hungry. So I made my way slowly to a restaurant of this kind which is not far from there, in St. Martin's Lane. Lunch hours in London restaurants were not so crowded in those days. I found not more than three or four hungry people scattered around the room. I chose a table, seated myself and opened the newspaper.

A waitress came up and waited politely for my order. I raised my eyes from the paper, glanced at the menu and told her what I required. "Thank you, sir," she said and went briskly and noiselessly away.

At that moment my attention was drawn to a table not far from mine. A young English girl was sitting there. She had been watching me with interested surprise but turned her eyes away as soon as I looked at her. There was nothing new in her surprise, for in white countries people are often charmed by the beauty of our coloured complexions and we receive more attention than we deserve.

The girl was thirteen or fourteen years old. Her clothes betrayed her poverty. Her hair hung in a heavy stream down her back. Her eyes were large. They had a sad expression. I watched her when she was not looking so that she would not notice. My lunch was served as she was finishing hers. The waitress brought her the bill. Bills are paid at the desk as one goes out. The desk is near the door.

The girl stood up. My eyes followed her. As she paid her bill she asked the cashier in a low voice, "Please, Miss, can you tell me if that gentleman is an Indian?"

"I think so," the cashier answered.

"Does he come here all the time?"

"Perhaps not. I do not recall having seen him before."

"Thank you," said the girl and looked at me once more with a startled air and went out.

It surprised me. Why? What was the matter? Her interest in me aroused my interest in her. When I had finished my lunch I asked the waitress, "Do you know the girl who was sitting over there?"

"No, sir, I do not know her to speak of. I notice she has lunch here on Saturdays."

"Doesn't she come any other day?"

"I never see her on other days."

"Have you any idea who she is?"

"Perhaps she works in a nearby shop."

"How do you know?"

"Saturday is pay day. That is when she comes. On other days she may not be able to afford lunch. Perhaps she does not earn very much."

I was moved by what she said.

The curiosity I felt about the girl persisted. Why had she inquired about me? Was some mystery the cause of her interest? Her poverty-stricken, sad and anxious figure took possession of my thoughts. Who was the child? Was there any possibility of my being of any help to her? On Sunday all London shops are closed. So I set out to look for her after breakfast on Monday morning. I looked into the shops on the streets near St. Martin's Lane and especially the shops on the Strand but I did not see her anywhere. The pockets of my over-coat were bulging with dozens of picture postcards, pencils, studs, ties and other things I did not need, for in each shop I had to buy something. But I found no trace of the girl.

The week passed. Saturday came again. I presented myself at the vegetarian restaurant once more. As I entered I saw her sitting at the same table as before. She was eating. I walked up and took the chair opposite hers, saying, "Good afternoon!"

"Good afternoon, sir," she responded hesitantly.

By making one brief remark after another I was able, slowly, to start a conversation. At last she asked, "Are you an Indian?"

"Yes."

"Excuse me, are you a vegetarian?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"I have heard that most Indians are vegetarians."

"How is it that you know anything about India?"

"My elder brother is in India. He is a soldier."

"I am not much of a vegetarian," I answered her question, "but I enjoy a vegetarian meal now and then."

The girl seemed disappointed.

I learned that her only guardian was this elder brother. She lived with her widowed mother, who was old, in Lambeth.

"Do you hear from your brother?"

"We have not had a letter from him for a long time. My mother is very worried. People tell her that India is full of tigers and snakes and fevers. She is afraid something has happened to him. Is it true, sir, that India is full of tigers and snakes and fevers?"

"No," I smiled, "how could people live there if it were?" The girl sighed softly. "Mother says she would like to ask an Indian about these things. If she can find an Indian," the girl looked at me with eyes full of entreaty.

I understood how she felt. She wanted me to see her mother but she did not have the courage to ask me to accompany her home. A keen desire to meet this poor anxious mother took hold of me. I had not had the opportunity to visit an impoverished English home. I wished to see how the poor live in this country, to know what they think.

"Will you introduce me to your mother some time? Would you like me to accompany you home? I can go some day."

The girl's eyes brimmed with gratitude. "Thank you ever so much!" she said. "It is so kind of you! Can you come now?"

"With pleasure."

"It will not interfere with anything else you have to do?"

"No, no, not at all. This afternoon is entirely my own."

The girl was delighted. We finished our lunch and got up together.

As we walked I asked her, "May I know your name?"

"My name is Alice Margaret Clifford."

"Oh! Are you Alice of *Alice in Wonderland?*" I joked.

"What is that?" she was alarmed.

I was nonplussed. I had imagined every English girl read the incomparable book.

"That is the name of a very nice book," I explained.
"Haven't you read it?"

"No. I have not read it."

"If your mother permits me," I said, "I shall make a present of it to you."

We chatted pleasantly until we passed St. Martin's Church and reached Charing Cross station. Double-decker buses were dashing up and down the Strand, rushing from both directions. There were innumerable cabs. We stopped in front of the telegraph office. "Let's wait for the Westminster bus here," I said.

"Would you mind walking?" she asked.

"Not at all," I answered, "if it is not difficult for you."

"No, I walk home every day."

This gave me the opportunity of asking her where she worked. To ask bluntly is not polite in England but there are many ways of circumventing the rules. For instance it is not offensive to ask a fellow traveller in a train, "Are you going far?" but to ask him, "Where are you going?" is considered very rude. The fellow passenger may, if he wishes, answer, "I am going to such-and-such-a-place," or if he does not wish to disclose his destination he may say, "Not very far." The question is thus answered while at the same time a certain reserve is maintained. So I asked the girl, "Do you come this way often?"

"Yes," she answered, "I work as a typist in the Civil Service stores. Every afternoon I come home this way. Today is Saturday so I am off early."

"Let us walk along the Embankment. It will be less crowded than the Strand." I said and, taking her by the arm, guided her carefully across the street.

The street known as the Embankment runs along the North shore of the Thames. "Do you usually go this way?" I asked as we made our way along it.

"No, it is less crowded, it is true, but the people are dirtier. I go home by the Strand and Whitehall."

This poor unsophisticated girl had defeated me. I admitted it. This was not the first time the English sense of beauty had disarmed me. We approached Westminster bridge.

"Shall I call you Miss Clifford or Alice?"

"I am not grown-up yet. You may call me what you like. I am usually called Maggie." She laughed.

"Are you very anxious to grow up?"

"Yes."

"Tell me why."

"When I grow up I shall be paid more for my work. My mother is old."

"Is the work you do to your liking?"

"No. The work is very mechanical. I want work that will make me use my head, brain work. Like the work of a secretary."

Guards were pacing up and down outside the Houses of Parliament. We left them on the right, crossed the bridge and arrived in Lambeth. It is poor neighbourhood. "If I ever become a secretary," Maggie said, "I shall take mother away from here."

"Why are you called by your second name instead of your first?" I asked as we pushed through the crowd of ill-dressed work people.

"My mother's first name is also Alice so my father called me by my second, making it my nickname."

"Did your father call you Maggie or Magsy?"

"When he was very affectionate he called me Magsy. How did you know?"

"Yes, yes," I answered mysteriously, "we are Indians, you know. We know about the future and all kinds of magic."

"That is what I have heard," she said.

"Indeed?" I was surprised. "What have you heard?"

"I have heard that there are many people in India who have occult powers. They are called yogis. But you are not a yogi."

"How do you know that I am not a yogi, Maggie?"

"Yogis do not eat meat."

"Is that why you asked me in the beginning whether I am

a vegetarian or not?"

She smiled without answering.

We had reached a narrow doorway. Maggie took a thin latch key out of her pocket and opened the door. She entered and said, "Please come in."

When I was inside Maggie closed the door. She went to the foot of the stairs and, raising her voice a little, called, "Mother, where are you?"

"I am in the kitchen, child," the answer came from below. "Come down."

It is necessary to explain here that London streets are above ground. Kitchens are often below street level.

Maggie looked at me questioningly, "Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. Come on." I said.

Together we descended the stairs to the kitchen.

"Mother," said Maggie from the doorway, "an Indian gentleman has come to see you."

"Where is he?" the old woman asked eagerly. With a smile I stepped into the kitchen behind Maggie. She introduced us. "This is Mr. Gupta, mother," she said, "Mr. Gupta, my mother."

"How do you do?" I said and held out my hand.

"Excuse me. My hands—" she said, holding them out for me to see. They were covered with flour. "Today is Saturday," she explained, "I am making cakes. People will come to buy them this evening. They'll be sold on the streets tonight. This is the way we make our living—lots of trouble!"

Saturday night is a time of festivity in poor neighbourhoods. All sorts of things are sold from countless lighted pushcarts. The streets are more crowded than on any other day. Saturday is the day the poor are able to spend a little for they receive their weekly wages.

Ingredients for cake making, flour, sugar, fat, raisins, eggs and so forth were set out in readiness upon the dresser. Several freshly baked cakes in tins were also there.

"Sitting in such a poor kitchen will not be very pleasant for you, will it?" Mrs. Clifford said, "I have almost finished my

work. Maggie, take him into the sitting room. I'll come in a minute."

"No, no," I protested, "I can sit here well enough. The cakes you make are nice ones, I must say!"

Mrs. Clifford thanked me with a smile.

"Mother makes good toffee also. Will you try some?" Maggie opened a cupboard and took out a tin. I ate several pieces and praised them.

"What kind of a country is India, sir?" asked Mrs. Clifford as she resumed her cooking.

"A beautiful country."

"Safe to live in?"

"Certainly. But not cold like this country. It is somewhat hot."

"Aren't there too many snakes and tigers? Don't they kill people?"

"Don't believe that," I laughed. "Snakes and tigers keep to the jungles. They get killed themselves if they come too close to place where people live."

"And fevers?"

"In some places in India there is more fever than in others. It is not the same everywhere nor the same all the year around."

"My son is in the Punjab. He is a soldier. What kind of a place is the Punjab?"

"The Punjab is a fine place. There is little fever there. It is very healthy."

"I am glad to hear it," Mrs. Clifford said.

Her baking was finished. "Maggie," she said, "take Mr. Gupta upstairs. I'll wash my hands and bring tea."

Maggie showed the way to their sitting room and I followed. The furniture was cheap and there was not much of it. The carpet was old, torn in places. But everything was extremely clean. Maggie drew the curtains back and opened the windows. There was a glass bookcase. I stood in front of it.

Mrs. Clifford came in carrying the tea tray a few minutes later. All trace of the kitchen had vanished from her person. As we drank tea I talked about India. Mrs. Clifford showed me a photograph of her son. It had been taken before he left. His name was Francis or Frank. Maggie brought out a book of

pictures he had sent her for her birthday. There were many pictures of Simla and the surrounding mountain country. On the inside page was written, "To Maggie on her birthday from her loving brother Frank."

"Maggie," said Mrs. Clifford, "show Mr. Gupta the ring."

"Has your brother sent you a ring?" I asked her. "Let me see what kind of a ring it is."

"It is a magic ring," Maggie explained. "A yogi gave it to Frank."

She brought it and asked, "Can you see the past and future in it?"

I had heard a lot about crystal gazing. A crystal was set in the ring. I took it up and examined it.

"When Frank sent the ring," Mrs. Clifford said, "he wrote that if you concentrate on a distant person as you gaze into it you will be able to see him and what he is doing. The yogi told Frank. Maggie and I have concentrated upon it again and again because we have not had any news from Frank for a long time. But we have not been able to see anything. Why don't you try? You are a Hindu. You may be able to do it!"

I realised that superstition is not confined to India. I did not have the heart to tell the mother and daughter that the ring was nothing much, brass with a piece of ordinary glass stuck into it. They believed their Frank had sent them a new and miraculous thing from a distant land, a dream India. How could I shatter their faith?

Urged by Mrs. Clifford and Maggie I took the ring into my hand and stared at it intensely for a long time. "I cannot see anything," I exclaimed at last, giving up.

Mother and daughter were disappointed. To change the subject, I said, "Here is a violin. It is yours, isn't it, Maggie?"

"Yes," Mrs. Clifford answered, "Maggie plays quite well. Maggie, please play something for us."

"Oh, Mother!" Maggie looked at her protestingly.

"Maggie," I pleaded, "please play something! I am very fond of the violin. I have a sister at home about your age. She used to play for me."

"The way I play is not at all worth listening to," Maggie said.

My entreaties at last persuaded her to play. "I do not know many pieces," she said. "What would you like to hear?"

"Shall I choose something? All right, then, give me your music. Let me see what you have."

Maggie brought out an old music case bound in black leather. I opened it. Most of the pieces were light airs like, 'Good-bye Dolly Grey,' 'Honeysuckle and the Bee,' etc. There were a few really good though old-fashioned ones, things like 'Robin Adair,' 'Annie Laurie,' 'The Last Rose of Summer,' etc. There were several Scotch songs. So I selected 'The Blue Bells of Scotland' and handed Maggie the music. Maggie played and I hummed the tune to myself.

When the song was over I praised her playing lavishly as I thanked her. "Maggie has never had the opportunity to study," Mrs. Clifford said. "She has learned what she knows by herself. If our circumstances ever improve I shall arrange for her to have lessons."

"Maggie, play something else," I said.

Maggie had overcome her shyness. "What shall I play?" she asked.

I went through her pieces. Not a single one of the compositions fashionable at the time in cultivated circles was there. I realised that no echo of them had yet reached the poorer neighbourhoods.

There was a minor classic among her pieces which I at last found, the 'Flower Song' from Gounod's opera, 'Faust.' I picked it up and said, "Please play this."

Maggie played it. When she finished I was silent with astonishment. My astonishment was occasioned by a sudden insight into the extent to which culture has penetrated even the lower levels of society in the West. Maggie played the difficult score beautifully yet she was only a girl of the people. It occurred to me that if the daughter of a distinguished Calcutta barrister or well-known civilian were able to play as well at her age a furore would be created in social circles.

"Did you learn that also by yourself?" I asked Maggie as I thanked her.

"No," she said, "I couldn't do that by myself. The daughter of the minister of our church helped me. Have you heard the

opera?"

"I have not heard the opera," I replied, "but I have seen *Faust* staged at the Lyceum in English translation. Goethe's *Faust*."

"At the Lyceum? Where Irving acts?"

"Yes. Have you ever seen him?"

Maggie answered ruefully, "No, I have never been to a West End Theatre. I have never seen Irving. I have not seen more than his photograph in the shop windows."

"Irving is acting in *The Merchant of Venice* now. If Mrs. Clifford and you are free to accompany me some evening I shall be delighted to take you."

Mrs. Clifford consented gratefully. "Which would you prefer," I asked, "the evening performance or the matinee?"

A word about the London theatre must be said here. Unlike Calcutta where the performance of a play is the subject of much comment, plays are staged every night with the exception of Sundays. In addition there are afternoon shows called matinees in some theatres on Wednesdays or Saturdays or on both days. A play causes little stir. Once it starts it is staged every day and runs as long as there is an adequate audience. Some plays run two months, some six. A popular musical comedy often has an uninterrupted run of two or three years.

"I am not very well," Mrs. Clifford said, "the matinee is best. We can go some Saturday after Maggie's office closes."

"Fine!" I said, "I'll go on Monday and buy tickets for the first Saturday available. I'll let you know the date."

"But Mr. Gupta!" Maggie said, "Don't buy expensive seats. We shall be very sorry if you do."

"No," I assured her. "Why should I buy expensive seats? I am not an Indian Rajah! I'll take seats in the Upper Circle. One thing! Have you read *The Merchant of Venice*?"

"Not the play itself. The story was in our text-book at school, Lamb's *Tales*. I read that."

"All right. I'll send you a copy of the play. Read it carefully beforehand and you will be able to understand the acting."

It was growing late. I took my leave.

I presented myself at the box office of the Lyceum Theatre at 10 o'clock on Monday morning and asked, "May I have three

tickets in the Upper Circle for the Saturday matinee?"

"No, sir," the ticket-seller said, "not for the next two Saturdays. The house is sold out."

"The third Saturday?"

"I can give them to you." He took out a plan of the theatre marked with the date and showed it to me. I saw that many seats in the Upper Circle for that day also were already sold. The numbers of the seats sold were struck through with a blue pencil. I took the plan, examined it, chose three seats in a row and gave their numbers to the ticket-seller. I took the three numbered tickets, paid twelve shillings and came away.

Three months passed. I visited Maggie and her mother several times at their home and took Maggie to see the Zoo once. She rode the elephant, 'Indian Rajah,' like all the other boys and girls. How delighted she was!

But no news had come from her brother. Urged by Mrs. Clifford I went to India House one day and made inquiries. I was told the regiment to which Frank belonged was fighting on the Northwest Frontier. Mrs. Clifford became extremely worried when she heard it. One day I received a postcard from Maggie. She wrote:

"Dear Mr. Gupta,

My mother is very ill. I have not been able to go to work for a week. We shall be extremely grateful if you take the trouble to come to see us.

Maggie"

I had told the family with whom I lived about Maggie and her mother. At breakfast I spoke of the letter.

My hostess said, "When you go take some money with you. The girl has not been able to go to work for a week. She had not received any pay. It is probable that they are hard up."

After breakfast I took some money and set out for Lambeth. I knocked at the door. Maggie opened it.

She was looking much pulled down. Her eyes were hollow and ringed. "Oh, thank you. Mr. Gupta!" she exclaimed when she saw me. "It is so kind of you."

"How is your mother, Maggie?" I asked.

"She is sleeping now. Her condition is very serious. The doctor says it is aggravated by her anxiety for Frank. There is no news from him yet. She may not live."

I tried to console Maggie, drying her eyes with my handkerchief. Maggie controlled herself with an effort and said, "I have a request to make of you, Mr. Gupta."

"What is it, Maggie?" I asked.

"Come into the sitting room and I'll tell you," she answered.

We tiptoed carefully into the sitting room lest the sound of our footsteps disturb the sick woman. I turned when I reached the centre of the room and remained standing there. "What is it, Maggie?" I repeated my question.

Maggie gazed up into my face with beseeching eyes. I waited. Then she covered her face with her hands and wept silently.

I was in a fix. What could I say to console this child? Her brother was fighting on the Frontier. Only God knew whether he was alive or dead. Her mother was the only person she had on earth. If she lost her what would happen? Where in London could this girl, on the threshold of adolescence, go?

I pulled her hands away from her face. "Maggie, tell me what you wish me to do. If there is anything I can do to help you I shall not hesitate."

"Mr. Gupta," the girl said, "I do not know what you will think of the request I am going to make. Please forgive me if it is very, very wrong."

"What is it? What do you wish to ask?"

"All day yesterday Mother kept saying that if Mr. Gupta would come and gaze into the crystal he might learn something about Frank. Mr. Gupta is a Hindu, she said. If only he would come, she said. That is why I wrote to you."

"If you want me to try once more, go and bring me the ring, Maggie. Of course I'll do it."

"But if you don't see anything again this time?"

I understood what Maggie meant. I was silent.

"Mr. Gupta, I have read in books that Hindus are extremely truth-loving. If you could bring yourself to tell Mother only once, after looking into the crystal, that Frank is all right, that

he is alive—will it be too much of a lie? Will it be very, very wrong?" As she spoke tears streamed from her eyes.

I thought it over. I am not very virtuous. I have done my sinful things. So I decided to do this. It would be the least of my offences. "Please, Maggie, don't cry. Where is the ring? Let me take a good look at it this time. If I do not see anything I shall do as you suggest. God will forgive me if it is wrong."

Maggie brought me the ring. I took it and said, "See if your mother is awake."

Fifteen minutes passed before Maggie came back. "Mother is awake," she said. "I have told her you are here."

"May I see her now?"

"Please come."

I approached the mother's bedside. The ring was in my hand. Wishing her a good morning I said, "Mrs. Clifford, your son is alive. He is well."

The old woman raised her head a little off the pillow. "Did you see that in the crystal?" she asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Clifford," I answered without any hesitation, "I have seen it."

Her head dropped back. Tears of happiness welled from her eyes. She whispered faintly. "God bless you! God bless you!"

Mrs. Clifford recovered.

It was almost time for me to return to my country. I wished to go to Lambeth to say good-bye to Maggie and her mother. But the family was in mourning. Frank had been killed in the fighting on the Frontier. A month before Maggie had sent me a card with a black border. I calculated from the date and found that Frank had been dead some days when I told his mother he was alive and well. I felt ashamed to face Mrs. Clifford. So I wrote a letter to them, announcing my departure and bidding them good-bye.

The morning of my last day in London dawned. I was to leave before night. As I was breakfasting with the family there was a knock at the door. A minute or two later the maid came in and announced, "Please Mr. Gupta, Miss Clifford has come

to see you."

My breakfast was unfinished. Maggie had come to say good-bye. Lest she be late for office because of me I took the permission of my hostess and got up from the table. Maggie was standing in the hall. She was wearing black.

I took her into the adjoining library and made her sit down.

"Are you leaving today?" she asked.

"Yes, Maggie, today is the day of my departure."

"How long will it take you to reach your country?"

"A little more than two weeks."

"In what part of the country do you live?"

"I have entered the Punjab Civil Service. I shall not know exactly where I am posted until I arrive there."

"Is the Frontier very far from there?"

"No, not very."

"Frank is buried at Fort Monroe near Dera-Ghazi-Khan." The girl's eyes filled with tears as she spoke.

"When I go to that part of the country I shall visit your brother's grave and write to you."

"It won't be troublesome for you? Or inconvenient?" Maggie asked.

"Why should it be? Dera-Ghazi-Khan is not very far from where I shall be. It will certainly be possible for me to go there some day. I'll write and tell you about it."

Maggie's face filled with gratitude. As she thanked me her voice choked. She took a shilling out of her pocket and put it down on the table in front of me, saying, "Please buy flowers with this shilling when you go and lay them on my brother's grave for me."

In my emotion I lowered my eyes. The child had earned the shilling with so much toil! I felt like returning it to her, explaining that in our country flowers grow in great profusion and do not have to be purchased.

But I reconsidered. Why should I deprive her of the joy this sacrifice would give her? All that this shilling could have given her she was foregoing for love of her brother. The joy of doing it was beyond all price. The grief in her heart would be eased a little. What good would it do to deprive her of it? I picked up the shilling.

"Maggie," I said, "I shall use this shilling to buy flowers and put them on your brother's grave."

Maggie stood up. "How can I thank you," she said. "Now it is time for me to go to work. Good-bye. Remember to write."

I got up and took her hand in mine. "Good-bye, Maggie, God bless you." I said and pressed her hand to my lips. Maggie left. I wiped a tear or two from my eyes and went upstairs to pack my bags.

*Translated from the original Bengali
by LILA RAY.*

BHABANI BHATTACHARYA

A Moment of Eternity

"PRISONER AT THE BAR," said the Judge, and his old man's voice faltered a little, his big round eyeglasses with a mounting of gold looked at my face but in truth looked away. "Prisoner at the bar," said the Judge and because I felt the throbbing of his old man's heart under the black alpaca coat and the knot of trouble that was for me to untie or clip away, I smiled at him, I smiled warmth, encouragement, as one would to one's father, and my eyes turned, prodded the black cap that lay on the enormous table. For the woman warder had said the night before, locking up the door of my cell, her tongue thick with meaning: "He has to pick up the black cap and place it on his head so he may look like Yama, the death-god, and then alone can he give the sentence and take a life by the mere utterance of ten words or twelve."

"Don the cap," I urged without words, "and speak as a man of justice must," and I pitied him for his trouble and loved him for his tenderness — the wrinkles ran deep in his face from the lower lids of the eyes down to the corners of the thin mouth with no mask of moustache, and again across, and perhaps a story in each graven wrinkle, the black cap's lingering ache. Then, I trembled. 'No—no—' I felt the mute scream thrum at my throat in a tightening of agony. The face of the Judge was naked with mercy. Yes, mercy. Would the cap lie unworn? Would justice be defeated? Eternity lay in my moment of waiting for the answer. A moment, yet an epitome, a condensation of all that had happened. Such, it is said, is the moment of a drowning person yielding his last breath — in that moment he lives his life all over again. And it made no difference that I was to be drowned not in river or pool, not in torture or tears, not in passion or its denial, but in an element that the world blesses and heaven too, the element called mercy.

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No, no, it could not be. There was time yet and hope. The blue-veined hand of justice peeking out of the stiff shirt sleeve fumbled, fumbled, toward the black cap.

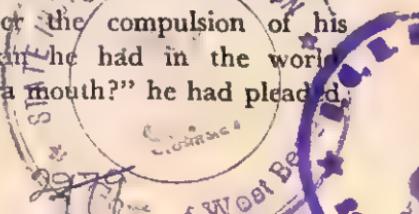
"Prisoner at the bar — "

"Mother of Sona-Mona—"

"Coming in a minute," I answered his call for I was bathing those two under the tap. Sona was small enough to stand under the tap sticking out of the wall four feet from the ground, but she would scream with joy and frisk and leap as water poured over her bare body and one had to be wary lest she dash her scalp against the tap mouth; it had happened twice and still the lesson was lost on her, the streaming water could not fail to unleash her ample spirits. But Mona had to be bathed in a small iron tub where she would sit with her legs folded and gurgle in tune with her sister's splashing of fun and one had to be wary, again, lest she scoop up water in her tiny palm, slip water into her toothless mouth. Water had better not be drunk unless it was first boiled. Not many city people of our poor middle class took such care with tap water, filtered at the source, but even so one could not be too heedful when children were involved. So he thought, Sona-Mona's father, who had named them both. Sona, gold, made sense, but Mona had no meaning, it was no word in our tongue. But the baby girl had to rhyme her name with her sister's, he said, and Mona was a foreign word that we could take for our use and it felt well on our tongue and so the little one was named. She was named Mona, rhyming with her elder sister. Sona and Mona.

He did not wait for my coming but stepped into the bathroom, closing the door quickly against the draught and seeing him I suddenly thought of him as he was six or seven years before, the time we were wed. Even then he had been thin in the face, cheekbones showing, and a faint dark half-moon under each eyelid and that was because he was given to worry and slept badly. He had married under the compulsion of his Grandma's tears, and she was all the kin he had in the world. Near kin, that is. "How feed an extra mouth?" he had pleaded.

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for he had just lost his first job, clerical work at a department store, and Old Mother had answered, "Mark my words, boy, you will get a better post in no time. You will then go up and up until you —" she had paused — "until you are a sub-inspector of police." He had laughed and said, "Then I ought to start as a police constable, so I may rise up and up to the elevated post." Old Mother had read his mockery and said grinning, "Boy, in my days a sub-inspector of police was a godling. But you mark my words, with your college learning, boy, you will be a High Court Judge."

He married on that assurance, or, more likely because he found work, in the office of a coal merchant. And the worry haunted him lest he be unemployed again, the worry took his sleep, it made a rim of dark under each eyelid. But even so there was a light in his face and it started to fade only a year back when once more he lost his job because the coal merchant's head assistant's nephew had to be provided for. Each day he hunted for work and at night also, in his sleep, and the thinness of his face grew and grew so that his nose was heavy against the cheek-bones, his eyes fled deep in their sockets. And there was nothing I could do, though I could bear the Seven Hells to give him the least relief. Oh, I could die a hundred deaths so he could be happy for a day. And I was helpless, for I had no art needed to make a living. I had nothing to give him save my soul. But what is a human soul worth? It is less in the pattern of life than a rice blade bearing grain.

"Mother of Sona-Mona —" His voice was excited, his face aflush. Looking at him I wiped my hand quickly on my sari and felt the warmth of his forehead. Yes, it was again too warm. He clutched my hand in his and went on, "There is a letter."

"The bus service?" All these days he had hoped for that letter, and feared lest it should not come. But my own true thoughts were about the fever in his body. "Let the doctor see you," I begged, as I had begged a hundred times in a month. "What if you fall seriously ill?"

"They will employ me as a conductor," he went on. "I start work on the first day of next month, you hear? Today is the twenty-fifth. What shall I buy you?"

"Listen," I begged, "what shall I do if you fall ill? How

shall I bear it? Why must you torture me? What evil fate is it that I put on flesh while you become a shadow?"

He laughed, he tweaked my nose. "Mother of Sona-Mona, when I am a bus conductor I shall get free medical help. I have thought it over. Two or three days after I start work I shall see the Company's doctor. Can't you hold your impatience till then? I am no fool to waste money on a doctor's fee and medicine when I can get all that free. Just a week more."

That was true. We could ill afford to pay a doctor's fee. Sona-Mona needed clothes for the winter. Their father needed a new shirt—every one he had was worn threadbare. He would not even buy new razor blades, he used old discarded ones after sharpening them on a slab of stone. If only his fever would leave in a while: the fever came off and on so that his eyes burned, his palms perspired and felt clammy.

"Let him get well," I prayed to all the gods, for I could have died a hundred deaths to save him an hour's headache. He was recounting what he would buy with his first pay. A georgette sari from Mysore for his wife—cotton was not good enough! Shoes for Sona; a foreign doll for Mona, one that shrieked when squeezed. Then, with the second month's pay...

So the inventory went for a minute till he stopped with a jerk. "Mind, lest Mona's bathwater gets too cold." He bent over to touch it with his finger and let his hand linger over the child, fondling her face, feeling her soft mass of hair, and he said, "She will grow up as comely as her mother, only her nose will be a trifle snub. The eyes are alike, jet-black, the lids kind of heavy—sleepy eyelids." And he looked up at me and I felt so much happiness that it hurt. He drew closer to me, he held me, gripping tightly, wanting me, and I gazed at his face with yielding but suddenly I heard him gasp, I saw his face grow dark, distorted, and the coughing came, hard, dry, racking, so that his lean body shook, his eyes bulged in distress. Then, upon my happiness poured suddenly the red life-blood, the broken blood of his lungs. I did not know that at the time, yet I knew. My instinct knew. My heart knew.

I wiped his mouth with my sari and, arms around him, I led him out of the room but he said pantingly, 'Mona'. I could spare no thought for the child in the bathtub. I led the sick man to

There was one way to destroy sanity.

I lived for the hour when I would be out of the hospital. I saw each possibility with clear eyes, in the smallest detail. The depths of the river? Or fire—clothes soaked well in kerosene? Yes, fire—that was the surest of all. In that room where Mona had suckled death out of my breast and Sona had taken it from my hand. That was it. Sanity burned me and I in turn would burn sanity.

Then they told me that I was to move my quarters—into prison. I was charged and on trial.

My planning was lost for the time. Yet there was hope. I had confessed my guilt. Two cold-blooded murders and an attempt at suicide. No, I was not out of my mind, I had said. I had done it all with full awareness, to save Sona-Mona misery. The misery of existence in a dark, pitiless world. I had no art to make a living. I had nothing to give them—save release. The law was clear and simple—I also was to have the same release. And the way of the law would be easier for me than the way of fire.

Here I was at last close to fulfilment.

The hand of justice out of the stiff shirt sleeve fumbled toward the black cap on the table in an absent way, then stopped as if startled, withdrew and folded itself on the alpaca coat, clutching the other blue-veined hand. "Prisoner at the bar—"

Daylight dimmed till I stared blindly into the darkest pit and felt my knees grow empty so that I had to cling to the bar of wood to keep to my feet. O God, I was not to die, I was to live, live four years—in prison.

"No!" I threw all the weight of my desperation in the shout, but even in my ears it rang as a whisper. In fierce anger and hate I gazed at the wrinkled face of justice and the mercy in the face made it look oddly naked.

My planning was without avail. Four years I must wait for its execution. For, in prison you can perhaps kill another person but not yourself. There is no great height you could reach so you might leap into space. There is no fatal stretch of water,

or fire, and no steel blade to cut your veins open.

If not death, then madness, for that also could defeat memory. With each drop of my heart's blood, with each nerve and cell and sinew I prayed for madness. Sanity remained, a huge burning light in my brain. It gave vividness to all I saw with the eye within. It sharpened all I heard, to the least undertone of Sona-Mona's voices, their crying and laughing, their sniffing from a touch of cold and their deep quiet breathing in sleep.

‘DHUMKETU’

The Letter

IN THE GREY SKY of early dawn stars still glowed, as happy memories light up a life that is nearing its close. An old man was walking through the town, now and again drawing his tattered cloak tighter to shield his body from the cold and biting wind. From some houses standing apart came the sound of grinding mills and the sweet voices of women singing at their work, and these sounds helped him along his lonely way. Except for the occasional bark of a dog, the distant steps of a workman going early to work, or the screech of a bird disturbed before its time, the whole town was wrapped in deathly silence. Most of its inhabitants were still in the arms of sleep, a sleep which grew more and more profound on account of the intense winter cold; for the cold used sleep to extend its sway over all things even as a false friend lulls his chosen victim with caressing smiles. The old man, shivering at times but fixed of purpose, plodded on till he came out of the town-gate on to a straight road. Along this he now went at a somewhat slower pace, supporting himself on his old staff.

On one side of the road was a row of trees, on the other the town’s public garden. The night was darker now and the cold more intense, for the wind was blowing straight along the road, and on it there only fell, like frozen snow, the faint light of the morning star. At the end of the garden stood a handsome building of the newest style, and light gleamed through the crevices of its closed doors and windows.

Beholding the wooden arch of this building, the old man was filled with the joy that the pilgrim feels when he first sees the goal of his journey. On the arch hung an old board with the newly painted letters: POST OFFICE. The old man went in quietly and squatted on the veranda. The voices of two or three people busy at their routine work could be heard faintly

through the wall.

'Police Superintendent', a voice inside called sharply. The old man started at the sound, but composed himself again to wait. But for the faith and love that warmed him he could not have borne the bitter cold.

Name after name rang out from within as the clerk read out the English addresses on the letters and flung them to the waiting postmen. From long practice he had acquired great speed in reading out the titles—Commissioner, Superintendent, Diwan Sahib, Librarian—and in flinging the letters out.

In the midst of this procedure a jesting voice from inside called, 'Coachman Ali!'

The old man got up, raised his eyes to Heaven in gratitude and, stepping forward, put his hand on the door.

'Godul Bhai!'

'Yes. Who's there?"

'You called out Coachman Ali's name, didn't you? Here I am. I have come for my letter.'

'It is a madman, sir, who worries us by calling every day for letters that never come,' said the clerk to the postmaster.

The old man went back slowly to the bench on which he had been accustomed to sit for five long years.

Ali had once been a clever shikari. As his skill increased so did his love for the hunt, till at last it was as impossible for him to pass a day without it as it is for the opium-eater to forgo his daily portion. When Ali sighted the earth-brown partridge, almost invisible to other eyes, the poor bird, they said, was as good as in his bag. His sharp eyes saw the hare crouching in its form. When even the dogs failed to see the creature cunningly hidden in the yellow-brown scrub, Ali's eagle eyes would catch sight of its ears; and in another moment it was dead. Besides this, he would often go out with his friends, the fishermen.

But when the evening of his life was drawing in, he left his old ways and suddenly took a new turn. His only child, Miriam, married and left him. She went off with a soldier to his regiment in the Punjab, and for the last five years he had had no news of this daughter for whose sake alone he dragged on a cheerless existence. Now he understood the meaning of

‘DHUMKETU’

The Letter

IN THE GREY SKY of early dawn stars still glowed, as happy memories light up a life that is nearing its close. An old man was walking through the town, now and again drawing his tattered cloak tighter to shield his body from the cold and biting wind. From some houses standing apart came the sound of grinding mills and the sweet voices of women singing at their work, and these sounds helped him along his lonely way. Except for the occasional bark of a dog, the distant steps of a workman going early to work, or the screech of a bird disturbed before its time, the whole town was wrapped in deathly silence. Most of its inhabitants were still in the arms of sleep, a sleep which grew more and more profound on account of the intense winter cold; for the cold used sleep to extend its sway over all things even as a false friend lulls his chosen victim with caressing smiles. The old man, shivering at times but fixed of purpose, plodded on till he came out of the town-gate on to a straight road. Along this he now went at a somewhat slower pace, supporting himself on his old staff.

On one side of the road was a row of trees, on the other the town's public garden. The night was darker now and the cold more intense, for the wind was blowing straight along the road, and on it there only fell, like frozen snow, the faint light of the morning star. At the end of the garden stood a handsome building of the newest style, and light gleamed through the crevices of its closed doors and windows.

Beholding the wooden arch of this building, the old man was filled with the joy that the pilgrim feels when he first sees the goal of his journey. On the arch hung an old board with the newly painted letters: POST OFFICE. The old man went in quietly and squatted on the veranda. The voices of two or three people busy at their routine work could be heard faintly

through the wall.

'Police Superintendent', a voice inside called sharply. The old man started at the sound, but composed himself again to wait. But for the faith and love that warmed him he could not have borne the bitter cold.

Name after name rang out from within as the clerk read out the English addresses on the letters and flung them to the waiting postmen. From long practice he had acquired great speed in reading out the titles—Commissioner, Superintendent, Diwan Sahib, Librarian—and in flinging the letters out.

In the midst of this procedure a jesting voice from inside called, 'Coachman Ali!'

The old man got up, raised his eyes to Heaven in gratitude and, stepping forward, put his hand on the door.

'Godul Bhai!'

'Yes. Who's there?'

'You called out Coachman Ali's name, didn't you? Here I am. I have come for my letter.'

'It is a madman, sir, who worries us by calling every day for letters that never come,' said the clerk to the postmaster.

The old man went back slowly to the bench on which he had been accustomed to sit for five long years.

Ali had once been a clever shikari. As his skill increased so did his love for the hunt, till at last it was as impossible for him to pass a day without it as it is for the opium-eater to forgo his daily portion. When Ali sighted the earth-brown partridge, almost invisible to other eyes, the poor bird, they said, was as good as in his bag. His sharp eyes saw the hare crouching in its form. When even the dogs failed to see the creature cunningly hidden in the yellow-brown scrub, Ali's eagle eyes would catch sight of its ears; and in another moment it was dead. Besides this, he would often go out with his friends, the fishermen.

But when the evening of his life was drawing in, he left his old ways and suddenly took a new turn. His only child, Miriam, married and left him. She went off with a soldier to his regiment in the Punjab, and for the last five years he had had no news of this daughter for whose sake alone he dragged on a cheerless existence. Now he understood the meaning of

love and separation. He could no longer enjoy the sportsman's pleasure and laugh at the bewildered terror of the young partridges bereft of their parents.

Although the hunter's instinct was in his very blood and bones, such a loneliness had come into his life since the day Miriam had gone away, that now, forgetting his sport, he would become lost in admiration of the green corn-fields. He reflected deeply and came to the conclusion that the whole universe is built up through love and that the grief of separation is inescapable. And seeing this, he sat down under a tree and wept bitterly. From that day he had risen each morning at four o'clock to walk to the post-office. In his whole life he had never received a letter, but with a devout serenity born of hope and faith he continued and was always the first to arrive.

The post-office, one of the most uninteresting buildings in the world, became his place of pilgrimage. He always occupied a particular seat in a particular corner of the building, and when people got to know his habit they laughed at him. The postmen began to make game of him. Even though there was no letter for him they would call out his name for the fun of seeing him jump up and come to the door. But with boundless faith and infinite patience he came every day, and went away empty-handed.

While Ali waited, peons would come for their firms' letters, and he would hear them discussing their masters' scandals. These smart young peons in their spotless turbans and creaking shoes were always eager to express themselves. Meanwhile the door would be thrown open and the postmaster, a man with a head as sad and inexpressive as a pumpkin, would be seen sitting on his chair inside. There was no glimmer of animation in his features; and such men usually prove to be village school masters, office clerks, or postmasters.

One day he was there as usual, and did not move from his seat when the door was opened.

"Police Commissioner!" the clerk called out, and a young fellow stepped forward briskly for the letters.

"Superintendent!" Another peon came; and so the clerk, like a worshipper of Vishnu, repeated his customary thousand

names.

At last they had all gone. Ali too got up and, saluting the post-office as though it housed some precious relic, went off, a pitiable figure, a century behind his time.

"That fellow," asked the postmaster, "is he mad?"

"Who, sir? Oh, yes," answered the clerk. "No matter what sort of weather, he has been here every day for the last five years. But he doesn't get many letters."

"I can well understand that! Who does he think will have time to write a letter every day?"

"But he's a bit touched, sir. In the old days he committed many sins; and may be he shed blood within some sacred precincts and is paying for it now," the postman added in support of his statement.

"Madmen are strange people," the postmaster said.

"Yes. Once I saw a madman in Ahmedabad who did absolutely nothing but make little heaps of dust. And another had a habit of going every day to the river-bed in order to pour water on a certain stone!"

"Oh, that's nothing," chimed in another. "I knew one madman, who paced up and down all day long, another who never ceased declaiming poetry, and a third who would slap himself on the cheek and then begin to cry out because he was being beaten."

And everyone in the post-office began talking of lunacy. All working-class people have the habit of taking periodic rests by joining in general discussion for a few minutes. After listening a little, the postmaster got up and said:

"It seems as though the mad live in a world of their own making. To them, perhaps, we too appear mad. The madman's world is rather like the poet's, I should think!"

He laughed as he spoke the last words, looking at one of the clerks who wrote indifferent verse. Then he went out and the office became still again.

For several days Ali had not come to the post-office. There was no one with enough sympathy or understanding to guess the

reason, but all were curious to know what had stopped the old man. At last he came again; but it was struggle for him to breathe, and on his face were clear signs of his approaching end. That day he could not contain his impatience.

"Master Sahib," he begged the postmaster, "have you a letter from my Miriam?"

The postmaster wanted to get out to the country, and was in a hurry.

"What a pest you are, brother!" he exclaimed.

"My name is Ali," answered Ali absent-mindedly.

"I know! I know! But do you think we've got your Miriam's name registered?"

"Then please note it down, brother. It will be useful if a letter should come when I am not here." For how should the villager who had spent three-quarters of his life hunting know that Miriam's name was not worth a pie to anyone but her father?

The postmaster was beginning to lose his temper. "Have you no sense?" he cried. "Get away! Do you think we're going to eat your letter when it comes?" And he walked off hastily. Ali came out very slowly, turning after every few steps to gaze at the post-office. His eyes were filling with tears of helplessness, for his patience was exhausted, even though he still had faith. Yet how could he still hope to hear from Miriam?

Ali heard one of the clerks coming up behind him, and turned to him.

"Brother!" he said.

The clerk was surprised, but being a decent fellow he said, "Well!"

"Here, look at this!" and Ali produced an old tin box and emptied five golden guineas into the surprised clerk's hands. "Do not look so startled," he continued. "They will be useful to you, and they can never be so to me. But will you do one thing?"

"What?"

"What do you see up there?" said Ali, pointing to the sky.

"Heaven."

"Allah is there, and in His presence I am giving you this money. When it comes, you must forward my Miriam's letter

to me."

"But where — where am I to send it?" asked the utterly bewildered clerk.

"To my grave."

"What?"

"Yes. It is true. To-day is my last day: my very last, alas! And I have not seen Miriam, I have had no letter from her." Tears were in Ali's eyes as the clerk slowly left him, and went on his way with the five golden guineas in his pocket.

Ali was never seen again, and no one troubled to inquire after him.

One day, however, trouble came to the postmaster. His daughter lay ill in another town, and he was anxiously waiting for news of her. The post was brought in, and the letters piled on the table. Seeing an envelope of the colour and shape he expected, the postmaster eagerly snatched it up. It was addressed to coachman Ali, and he dropped it as though it had given him an electric shock. The haughty temper of the official had quite left him in his sorrow and anxiety, and had laid bare his human heart. He knew at once that this was the letter the old man had been waiting for: it must be from his daughter Miriam.

"Lakshmi Das!" called the postmaster, for such was the name of the clerk to whom Ali had given his money.

"Yes, sir?"

"This is for your old coachman Ali. Where is he now?"

"I will find out, sir."

The postmaster did not receive his own letter all that day. He worried all night, and getting up at three, went to sit in the office. "When Ali comes at four o'clock," he mused, "I will give him the letter myself."

For now the postmaster understood all Ali's heart, and his very soul. After spending but a single night in suspense, anxiously waiting for news of his daughter, his heart was brimming with sympathy for the poor old man who had spent his nights for the last five years in the same suspense. At the stroke of five he heard a soft knock on the door: he felt sure it was Ali. He rose quickly from his chair, his suffering father's heart recognizing another, and flung the door wide open.

"Come in, brother Ali," he cried, handing the letter to the meek old man, bent double with age, who was standing outside. Ali was leaning on a stick, and the tears were wet on his face as they had been when the clerk left him. But his features had been hard then, and now they were softened by lines of kindness. He lifted his eyes and in them was a light so unearthly that the postmaster shrank back in fear and astonishment.

Lakshmi Das had heard the postmaster's words as he came towards the office from another quarter. "Who was that, sir? Old Ali?" he asked. But the postmaster took no notice of him. He was staring with wide-open eyes at the doorway from which Ali had disappeared. Where could he have gone? At last he turned to Lakshmi Das. "Yes, I was speaking to Ali," he said.

"Old Ali is dead, sir. But give me his letter."

"What! But when? Are you sure, Lakshmi Das?"

"Yes, it is so," broke in a postman who had just arrived. "Ali died three months ago."

The postmaster was bewildered. Miriam's letter was still lying near the door; Ali's image was still before his eyes. He listened to Lakshmi Das' recital of the last interview, but he could still not doubt the reality of the knock on the door and the tears in Ali's eyes. He was perplexed. Had he really seen Ali? Had his imagination deceived him? Or had it perhaps been Lakshmi Das?

The daily routine began. The clerk read out the addresses — Police Commissioner, Superintendent, Librarian — and flung the letters deftly.

But the postmaster now watched them as eagerly as though each contained a warm, beating heart. He no longer thought of them in terms of envelopes and postcards. He saw the essential, human worth of a letter.

That evening you might have seen Lakshmi Das and the postmaster walking with slow steps to Ali's grave. They laid the letter on it and turned back.

"Lakshmi Das, were you indeed the first to come to the office this morning?"

"Yes, sir, I was the first."

"Then how...No. I don't understand..."

"What, sir?"

"Oh, never mind," the postmaster said shortly. At the office he parted from Lakshmi Das and went in. The newly-waked father's heart in him was reproaching him for having failed to understand Ali's anxiety, for now he himself had to spend another night of restless anxiety. Tortured by doubt and remorse, he sat down in the glow of the charcoal sigri to wait.

Translated from the original Gujarati by the author.

PREM CHAND

The Child

PEOPLE CALL Gangu a Brahmin. He considers himself one, too. All my other servants bow to me. But Gangu never greets me like this. Probably he expects me to bow to him. He never touches any of the used utensils. I lack the courage to ask him even to fan me in the hot weather. Sometimes when nobody else is around and I am dripping with perspiration, he does pick up a fan, but his attitude is that he is doing me a great favour. He is short-tempered also and cannot tolerate even the slightest rebuke. He has very few friends and considers it below his dignity to sit with the *syc*¹ or the bearer. I have never seen him being friendly with anyone. Nor does he ever go to a fair or a show. He is not even fond of *bhang*², which is a common addiction of people of his class.

He never prays; nor does he go for a bath in the river; and he is completely illiterate. Yet he expects all the respect due to a Brahmin.

Why shouldn't he? If other people can claim respect on the basis of wealth left to them by their forefathers, surely Gangu can also claim respect on account of his ancestry.

I do not talk to my servants except when it is necessary. They have strict instructions not to invade my privacy unless they are sent for. Such small matters as getting a glass of water, or putting on the shoes, or lighting the lamp, I prefer to do myself rather than send for them. It gives me a feeling of independence and self-reliance. The servants know my habits by now and they seldom bother me.

If ever they pay an unsolicited visit to me it is either that they want an advance against their salary or that they wish to complain about other servants. Both these practices I consider

¹Coachman.

²A herbal narcotic and intoxicant.

reprehensible. When I pay them regularly and enough I do not see any reason why they should finish a month's salary in fifteen days. And back-biting I consider a sign of weakness or a mode of flattery both of which are ignoble.

One morning Gangu came to me without being sent for. I felt annoyed and asked him, irritably, what he had come for. From Gangu's face it appeared that he wanted to say something but in spite of his best efforts the words refused to come to the lips. I said again after a little pause, "What is the matter? Why don't you speak out? You know it is getting late for my morning walk." Gangu replied, haltingly, "Please do not delay yourself. I shall come some other time." This was worse, I know. Now that I was in a hurry, Gangu would have cut short his tale. If he came when he thought I had more leisure he would perhaps waste my time for hours. He only considered me busy when I was reading or writing. When he found me just alone, sitting in a contemplative mood, he thought that I was merely idling. And it was almost certain that he would inflict himself on me in one of these moments, little realizing how precious they were for me.

I wanted to dispose of him right then and said, "If you have come for an advance, you can rest assured that you will not get it."

"I do not want an advance," said Gangu, "I have never asked you for one."

"Then you must be wanting to complain against someone," I said. "You know how I hate back-biting."

"No sir," said Gangu, "I have no complaints against anyone."

"What have you come to bother me about then?" I asked impatiently.

Gangu made another attempt to disclose his secret. I could see from his face that he was trying to muster up strength to do it. At last he said, "I wish to be relieved of my duties, sir. I shall not be able to serve you any longer."

This was the first request of its kind and I felt hurt. I was considered an ideal employer and the servants thought it their good fortune to stay on with me. "Why do you want to leave?" I asked.

"You are the image of kindness, sir," said Gangu. "Who

would want to leave you unless there was a very good reason? I find myself in a situation which leaves me with no other alternative. I do not want people to raise their fingers at you on my account."

This was most intriguing. I forgot all about my morning walk and seating myself in a chair, said, "Why do you talk in riddles? Why don't you say clearly what is on your mind?" Gangu replied haltingly again: "Sir, the thing is that....that woman who has just been turned out of the Widow's Home....that Gomti Devi...." and he stopped without finishing the sentence. I asked impatiently, "What has she to do with your job?"

"I want to marry her, sir," said Gangu.

I looked at him in sheer bewilderment. How had this old-fashioned Brahmin, who had not even been touched by modern civilization, decided to marry a woman, whom no self-respecting man would even allow near his house? Gomti had created quite a stir in the placid atmosphere of our mohalla¹. She had entered the Widow's Home some years ago. Twice the Home authorities had got her married off but both times she had come back after a week or so. Ultimately the Home had decided to expel her. She had now taken a room in the mohalla and was an object of great interest to all the love-lorn young men.

I felt both annoyed with and sympathetic towards Gangu. "Why couldn't this stupid man find another woman to marry?" I said to myself. I was certain that she would not stick to him for more than a few days. If he had been better off financially, she might have stuck on for six months or so but now I was sure the marriage would not last more than a few days.

"Are you aware of her past?" I asked him.

"It's all lies, sir," he said with great conviction. "People have given her a bad name for nothing."

"What nonsense!" I said, "Can you deny that she has left three husbands?"

"What could she do," replied Gangu unperturbed, "if those people turned her out?"

"What a fool you are!" I added, "Can you really believe

¹Neighbourhood.

that a man comes all the way to marry a woman, spends thousands of rupees on the marriage, only to turn her out in the end?"

Gangu replied almost with the zeal of a poet, "Where there is no love, you cannot expect a woman to stay on. You cannot win a woman with mere board and lodging. Those people who married her thought that they were doing her a great favour by marrying a widow and took it for granted that she would do everything for their sake. But to win someone over one has first to forget about oneself. And besides, sir, she gets fits, sometimes, starts talking all sorts of nonsense and becomes unconscious. People say that she is under the influence of a witch."

"And you want to marry such a woman," I said. "Don't you realize that you are asking for trouble?"

Gangu replied in the tone of a martyr, "God willing, I shall make something of myself, if I get her."

"So you have decided finally," I asked him.

"Yes sir," he replied.

"All right," I said, "in that case I accept your resignation."

Normally, I don't believe in old customs and meaningless traditions. In this particular case, however, I considered it definitely dangerous to keep in the house a man who was intent on marrying a woman of such doubtful reputation. It might lead to all sorts of complications. To my mind, Gangu, in marrying this woman, was behaving like a starving man. That the piece of bread was dry and tasteless was immaterial to him. I considered it wise to keep aloof.

Five months passed. Gangu had married Gomti and was living in the same mohalla in a thatched hut. He was now earning a living as a hawker. Whenever I met him on the road, I stopped to enquire about his welfare. His life was a matter of great interest to me. I was impatient to know how it would all end. However, I always found him happy. His face had a glow which only comes with complete lack of worry. He earned about a rupee every day. After buying his stock, he was left with about ten annas or so. There must have been some supernatural power in those ten annas to give him such complete contentment.

One day I heard that Gomti had run away. I don't know why but this gave me a great pleasure. It was perhaps that

Gangu's self-confidence and ease had always made me envious. I was happy that I had been proved right, after all. He would now realize that the people who had dissuaded him from marrying Gomti were really his well-wishers. "What a fool he was," I thought to myself, "to consider marrying Gomti a matter of good fortune, even to consider it as entering paradise." I was impatient to meet him.

He looked completely shattered when I met him that afternoon. Seeing me he started to cry and said, "Babuji, Gomti has left me."

I replied with feigned sympathy, "I told you in the beginning to keep away from her but you did not listen. Has she taken away your belongings also?"

Gangu put his hands on his heart as if I had blasphemed and said, "Don't say that, Babuji, she hasn't taken a thing. Her own stuff is still lying here. I don't know what shortcomings she found in me that she decided to leave. I am sure I wasn't good enough for her. She was educated and I am an absolute illiterate. If I could have stayed on with her a little longer she would have made a man out of me. Whatever she might have been for other men, for me she was definitely a goddess. I must have been at fault somewhere that she decided to leave."

I was most disappointed at Gangu's words. I had been certain that he would tell me a tale of faithlessness on the part of Gomti and that I would have to show sympathy towards him. But it seemed that this fool still had his eyes closed or perhaps he had lost his sense of perception. I said, half in jest, "So she hasn't taken away anything from the house!"

"No, not even a penny's worth."

"And she loved you very much?"

"What more can I say, Babuji? I shall not forget her till I die."

"And yet she decided to leave you?"

"This is what surprises me."

"Have you ever heard the old saying, 'Frailty, thy name is woman'?"

"Oh, don't say that, Babuji. I would never for a moment believe that in respect of her."

"Then go and find her out if you are still so attached to her."

"Yes, master, I won't get any respite till I have found her. If only I knew where to look for her! I am certain that she will come back to me. I must go and search for her. I will see you when I come back if I am still alive." And saying this he went away.

After this incident I had to go to Nainital, and returned after nearly a month. I had barely taken off my clothes when I saw Gangu standing with a new-born baby. He was bursting with joy. Even Nanda could not have felt such joy at getting Krishna¹. His face had the same glow that appears on the face of a starved man after a full meal. I asked him again in jest. "Have you had any news of Gomti Devi? I believe you went in search of her." Gangu said, beaming with joy, "I have found her at last, Babuji. She was in the Women's Hospital in Lucknow. She had told a friend here that if I was very upset I should be informed about her whereabouts. As soon as I heard it I went to Lucknow and brought her back. I have also got this child in the bargain." He showed me the child almost with the pride of an athlete showing off a newly won medal.

I was surprised at his shamelessness. He had not been married to Gomti for more than six months and yet he was displaying the child with great pride. I said tauntingly, "Oh, so you have got a boy also. That is perhaps why she ran away. Are you sure this is your child?"

"Why mine, Babuji, it is God's."

"It was born in Lucknow, wasn't it?"

"Yes Babuji, it was a month old only yesterday."

"How long have you been married?"

"This is the seventh month."

"So this child was born within six months of your marriage."

"Yes," said Gangu, undisturbed.

"And still you consider it your child?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you in your senses?" I asked. I was not quite certain whether he did not understand what I was trying to hint at or whether he was intentionally misunderstanding me.

"She had a very difficult time," said Gangu in the same tone.

¹ Krishna, the divine child of Hindu mythology, was brought up by the cowherd, Nanda.

"It is almost a new life for her, Babuji. For full three days and three nights she was in pain. Oh, it was unbearable."

This was the point for me to interrupt and I said, "This is the first time I have heard of a child being born within six months of marriage."

This question surprised Gangu; he said with an impish smile, "This has never bothered me. This was the reason perhaps why Gomti had left the house. I told her that if she did not love me she could leave me by all means and I would never bother her again. But if she did love me she must not let the child separate us. I would love it as my own. After all, when one takes a harvested field one does not refuse the crop merely because some one else has sown it."

He gave a hearty laugh.

I was most touched by Gangu's sentiments and felt an utter fool. I extended my hands, took the child from Gangu and kissed it. Gangu said, "Babuji, you are the embodiment of goodness. I often talk to Gomti about you and have many times asked her to come and pay her respects to you. But she is so bashful."

I, the embodiment of goodness! My middle class morality stood ashamed at Gangu's courage and sincerity.

"You are the embodiment of goodness," I said, "and this child adds charm to it. Let me come with you and meet Gomti." And we both went to Gangu's house.

*Translated from the original Hindi
by MADAN GUPTA.*

MASTI VENKATESA IYENGAR

The Curds-seller

MANGAMMA has been supplying curds to us for several years now. Our relations are of the kind usual in this city. In other places the curds-seller supplies the curds you require day after day and takes payment at the end of a month. Here, supplying and payment take place on the same day and you are not bound to take any quantity every day. The curds-woman passes by our house most days. On such days she gets into the house and asks if we want any curds. We buy if we need it and pay at the rate prevailing on the day or, at the latest, pay her next day. Her village is close to Avalur. I forget its name: Venkapur or something like it. As I talked sympathetically Mangamma sometimes visited me both on her way to the city and back to her village. She would sit in the yard and say a few words about one thing or another, chew *pan-supari* or ask for it, and after resting for some time start for her village. If I had the time she would tell me of the troubles in her household and ask me to tell her of mine. What trouble had I to report to her? By God's grace everything is well with me. The worst I can report would be that the cat came and drank up the milk or that the rats ate the cucumber overnight. When I told her of such things Mangamma would say: "Alas, that is the way of the world" and that would start her on a discourse regarding her experience, with hints for managing this world of refractory ways. Mangamma and myself thus came to be very intimate companions.

One day about a month ago Mangamma came and called out as usual asking if I wanted curds. I was within. My little boy said: "Yes. We want curds," and walking up to her and stretching his hand out asked: "Give it." Mangamma sat down and

took out a piece of good thick curd and put it in his hand. "Ask mother to come soon," she told him, "I have to go." By that time I had come out. Mangamma said: "Ammayya, you have a child precious as gold. You are so good and your child is worthy of you. But, Ammayya, what is the use of all this? It lasts only till he grows up. When he does grow up some creature comes along to own him. The boy who calls one, mother, mother, so prettily will not ask then whether the mother is alive or dead."

I said: "Something seems to have happened, Mangamma. Surely your son treats you with respect?"

"Oh well, I suppose I am foolish to expect anything else. My husband deserted me. I can expect nothing better from my son."

"Why Mangamma, I thought you were happy with your husband."

"You see, Ammayya, I never bothered about wearing good saris and looking pretty; another woman did, and she drew my husband away from me. I thought it best to bear it without a murmur. I let him feel that he had his home and his wife to come to any time he chose. I shouldn't grumble, Ammayya. They say we shouldn't sell milk and curds — they are 'Amrita.' I sinned that way and paid the penalty. I lost my husband. That is my fate. But look, Ammayya, you must be careful. Wear pretty saris at the time your husband comes home. Men are inconstant. You must snare them with a pretty sari or blouse. Buy flowers and perfume, and make yourself attractive." Then she glanced at the sari I was wearing and shook her head. "This is all right when you are alone and working in the kitchen. But you must change it towards evening. Wear something pretty."

I laughed. It was sound sense all right. But it was a pity that she should have had to pass through years of sorrow to learn this wisdom.

"You are right, Mangamma," I said.

"Look, Ammayya, there are four ways of keeping husbands true to us. Some people would tell you to administer this or that herb or root. You might as well take them to the cremation-ground straightaway. Don't you listen to such advice. Give him something nice to eat every now and then; whatever your

difficulties at home, dress well, look desirable, and keep smiling; get all the grocery you want once every month and don't worry him about marketing; lay by a little money and give him a rupee or two when he asks for it. This is all the herb and root needed. Let a woman do this, and her husband will follow her like a dog. Forget this, and his thoughts begin to wander."

"Here is a wise woman," I thought as I bade her good-bye.

One morning, about a fortnight ago, she came in a very dejected mood.

"What is the matter, Mangamma?" I asked.

"Nothing pleasant, Ammayya. Why talk about it!" she said, wiping her eyes with the edge of her sari. "I don't seem to be wanted by anybody."

"What has happened? Had words with your son?"

"Words enough, Ammayya. I have told you of that little child, my grandson. He did something and his mother beat him. I couldn't stand it. 'You are brutal,' I said, 'to beat that child like a Rakshasi!' She faced me, bold as brass, and abused me roundly. 'Is this the language you use to me who gave birth to your husband?' I said, 'Let him come home. He will have something to say about it.' When he came home I told him of what had happened: 'She thrashes that poor darling mercilessly, and when I protest she has the temerity to abuse me. Can't you put some sense into her?' 'Put sense into me indeed!' she intervened, 'Have I no right to bring my own child to order? Didn't I give him birth even as you did to your son?'

"Well, she is his wife; I am only his mother. She can turn round on me any time, and I can do nothing. 'Well, mother,' he said, after all it is her own child. Why should you interfere? If you must call somebody to order, here I am.'

"Then you think I am wrong?"

"I don't know about right and wrong. But you cannot very well deny her the right to punish her own child."

"I see. You are completely under her thumb. She may beat her child, and heap abuse on me, and it is all right with you. Tomorrow she will ask you to drive me out, and I shouldn't

wonder if you do it.'

"Well, mother, what would you have me do? Suppose you tell me that you will not stay here if my wife does, and that she should not stay if you do. If I am to choose...well, she is a helpless woman...."

"And I am not helpless? Who will look after me?"

"Well, you have money laid by; you have cows and calves; you are not dependent on me."

"So you would have me set up house by myself?"

"That is as you please. If you insist on setting up separately, I wouldn't say no. I have had enough of these bickerings."

"Very well then. From this afternoon I live apart from you. May you and your wife be happy."

"I said this and came away with the curds." Mangamma burst into tears as she ended her narrative. I did what I could to comfort her. "Forget it, Mangamma. I know you will go home and live with them as before. These things adjust themselves."

The next day she appeared to be a little more composed, though certainly not her old cheerful self. I asked her if she had made peace with her son. "Peace! Do you think this daughter-in-law of mine would permit mother and son to be on good terms? By the time I went home yesterday she had kept my pots and pans, an earthen vessel full of *ragi* and another of rice, some salt and chillies, all on one side. She and her husband had finished their meal and she was lolling on the mat without a care in the world. Apparently they were waiting for an excuse to put me out, and I supplied it. All right, I wouldn't thrust myself on them. I now live by myself. You see how far they go, Ammayya? I used to give some curds to the child everyday before going out. Today she took the child out just at that time. Clearly she doesn't want me to speak to her child."

I was surprised that what was after all a trivial incident should have assumed such proportions. But of course there was nothing I could do about it. After a few commonplaces I sent her away.

For a day or two after this Mangamma did not mention the subject again. I took it that she was living separately. And then one day she asked me what the velvet jacket I wore cost me.

"Why this interest in it, Mangamma?" I asked.

"You see, Ammayya, hitherto I was saving up money for my son and grandson. I see no point in my doing so any longer. I thought I might buy myself a velvet jacket."

"It might cost seven or eight rupees."

She left and apparently ordered the jacket on her way home. She wore it when she came the next day.

"You see this finery, Ammayya? When I had my husband I never bought a good sari; and he went after another woman. I saved money for my son, and you know what he has turned out to be. Now I am flaunting velvet!"

Had the shock of being turned out by her son unsettled her mind, I wondered. Extreme passion sometimes has that effect. I said nothing however.

The story of the velvet jacket did not end there. It led to quarrels with some people in the village. One of the boys of the village was attending a school at Bangalore. He affected western dress — collar, tie and all. When he met Mangamma he said jocularly, "Well, Mangamma, what is the festive occasion? I mean, the velvet jacket...."

Mangamma flared: "The impertinent youngster! Hold your tongue, will you? If you can choke yourself with that thing round your neck, why grudge me my velvet jacket?" Hot words passed, a dozen people gathered, and there was laughter at her expense.

This was reported to me duly the next day. The daughter-in-law made this the occasion for comments of her own — made in the hearing of Mangamma. She said to her neighbours, "My mother-in-law cannot buy me a blouse. But did you see hers?" At the time of her son's marriage Mangamma had given the bride a necklace, ear-rings, bangles, pendants etc., and every year she had been buying her some ornament or other. The daughter-in-law forgot all this.

Mangamma took no notice of her comments the first and the second time and then complained to her son: "Your wife has

been making biting remarks about my jacket. She has been going about saying that I never bought her any present. Haven't I given her bangles, necklace and ear-rings?" Before the son could say anything his wife snapped, "I suppose the old widow wants to wear ear-rings and bangles. She can have them and flaunt them." "Less sauce, my girl," said the husband in mild rebuke and turning to his mother said, "Mother, I have had enough of these quarrels. If you want the jewellery you gave my wife, you can take them back."

"You see, Ammayya?" Mangamma commented, "He does not ask his wife to stop saying things about me to our neighbours. He offers me the jewellery, putting me in the wrong! I am sick of life."

I felt very sorry for her. She was old and this son was her only child. Surely his wife could be more considerate to her mother-in-law! And all this because the old woman asked her not to beat the child! Why can't people be more sensible? But then, this is how quarrels generally develop. If two people do not like each other, any trivial incident is enough to touch off a quarrel; and there is endless pain to all concerned.

Some time after this, Mangamma came to me with a request: "Ammayya, you are good people and I can trust you. I have some money laid by. Could you put it in that place they call a bank? It is attracting people's attention."

"What happened?"

"There is a man called Rangappa in our village, a dandy and a gambler. Yesterday as I was coming along with the curds, he joined me and said, 'I hope you are keeping well, Mangamma.'

"'So so,' I said, 'you know how things are with me.'

"Yes, Mangamma, I know. You are right. With people behaving as they do, how can anybody be happy. These young people cannot keep their tongues in leash and we older people wonder that such things should be. But that is how the world goes, Mangamma."

"We walked on. I grew uneasy wondering why he was following me—there is a deep well near that grove, and I had

some money in my purse. But nothing happened. He asked me for some lime, took it, and went his way. Today he was there again. He talked of this and that and then said, 'Mangamma, I am badly in need of money. Could you lend me some? Come harvest time, I shall sell my *ragi* and pay you back.' 'Money!' I said, 'how should I have any!' 'O, we all know. What is the good of keeping money buried, Mangamma? You can help me, and earn some interest on it.' And after a while he added, 'I would not have asked you if you and your son and daughter-in-law lived together. Naturally you would have liked to give them presents now and then. But now that you are living away from them....'

"You see, Ammayya, when a woman lives alone she draws attention."

I said that I would speak to my husband about it.

The next day she said, after measuring out the curds, "Shall we go in, Ammayya? You can count the money."

"I haven't mentioned the matter to my husband, Mangamma. Some other time."

"But I am feeling frightened, Ammayya. Rangappa waylaid me again this morning near the grove. 'Sit down, Mangamma,' he said, 'you are not in a hurry?' I sat down—I was afraid he might use force. He talked of all things and sundry and then took my hand and said, 'How nice you look, Mangamma!'

"Ammayya, even when I was young, my own husband would not hold my hand. No other man has ever held it. And now this has happened! I drew away at once and said curtly, 'Enough of this nonsense, Rangappa. You are not my husband, and it is no business of yours how I look'. Yesterday he wanted my money, and today my honour. The man who sat by my side on my marriage-day, had the auspicious rice showered on him, and called me wife—he left me in my youth. Another woman would have sought consolation elsewhere. But I preserved my honour. And today this rascal dares to seize my hand!"

Mangamma's affairs seemed to be taking a serious turn. "Look, Mangamma, you are heading for trouble. Tell your son about this. Why don't you forget the past and go back to him?"

"And give my daughter-in-law a chance to spread rumours about me and make me an outcast?Well, it is getting late,

Ammayya. Please mention the matter to your husband and tell me tomorrow."

She was back again an hour later. "A strange thing happened today," she began.

"What?"

"I bought some sweets for the child...."

I didn't understand this. She had told me that her grandchild was not allowed near her.

"What child?"

"Why, my grandchild, of course, What other child could it be?"

"But you told me that he was not allowed to come to you?"

"True, the mother forbids it. But would the child keep away from me? He runs up to me when his mother is not looking, drinks some milk, asks for curds, and dances about when I give it. When he upsets things I tell him that his mother will take him away, and that keeps him quiet. It is a delight to watch children's pranks, Ammayya. So today I bought some sweets for him and put them in my basket. Near Shankarpur a crow swooped down from a mango tree and carried off the packet."

"That is nothing to worry about. You can buy some more."

"Of course I can. It is not that, Ammayya. But they say it is a bad omen, being touched by a crow."

"Why, what happens if it does?"

"They say it means death. That is why I was perturbed. But after a minute I told myself it was as well. Mine is a life nobody values. The sooner I touch the feet of God the better. Anyway that is what happened."

"Don't be silly, Mangamma. You put a packet of sweets where any sensible crow would go for it, and when the packet is carried off you say it is an omen of death! Go home, and don't be absurd."

"Then you think it does not mean anything?"

"Nonsense. Go home and forget it."

It is strange, the way this woman's thoughts run. She wants her son, wants her daughter-in-law and her grandson; she wants to be respected as the head of the household. All that is natural enough, quite human. Now that she is denied what she wants

she is tired of life; and yet she is afraid of death! And she wants to conceal that fear. We say these village folk are simple and unsophisticated. But how complex her mind and thoughts are—layer on layer, fold on fold! It is a queer game, this thing we call life.

Mangamma reported fresh developments when she came next. Her grandson had come to stay with her. She was delighted. "The courage of the child!" she said, "He is such a little fellow, hardly that high, and yet he leaves his mother and comes to me! He used to come on the sly; but yesterday he came and said he would not go back to his mother. She came, threatened to thrash him, made a scene—but the child clung to my knees and would not budge. Of course I urged him to go back, and his father also coaxed him. But the child would not listen. It is strange, Ammayya: these ten days I have been a little scared of sleeping alone in the house. But the presence of this little child has given me courage—I feel I have male protection. My grown-up son will not have me with him; but my grandson tells me he will stand by me. It must be God that put it into his head. My daughter-in-law raged throughout the night. But it had no effect on the child. This morning I felt that the child should not be left alone when I was away curds-selling. I took him to her door, and he went in."

"But suppose she beats the child?"

"No, she won't. She might beat him sometimes when he is always with her. But now she will be happy that the child will be with her at least for half-a-day. It is this way, Ammayya: you see, when we lived together I had never noticed how pretty my daughter-in-law was. Of course she does look queer when she frowns. But now I see her from a distance, as you might say. She does look pretty, and that is why my son is her slave. I took my son too for granted. I never noticed when he came in and when he went out. Now I sit at the door of my house and wonder why he is so late in coming or why he leaves home so early. She must feel the same about her child. If she beats him he would come away to the city with me tomorrow. Would

she give up the child she has borne?"'

"Thoughtful woman," I said to myself. I felt that their differences would soon be amicably settled.

And that is what happened. The child spent two mornings with his parents and on the third he insisted on accompanying his grandmother on her rounds in the city. The old woman could not, of course, carry both the child and the basket with the pot of curds. This presented a problem. Then her son and daughter-in-law came to her and said, "Mother, grant that we were in the wrong; should you carry your anger so far?" The neighbours also spoke for them. Mangamma went back without loss of face, as she was longing to do. But taking the child to the city with her was still a problem. So they came to an arrangement. Mangamma had so far kept the milk-and-curds business in her own hands. The ostensible reason was that the daughter-in-law had to do the cooking; the real reason was that Mangamma wanted the purse-strings in her own hands. Now that the child insisted on keeping company with her, things had to change. The daughter-in-law said, "Why should you in your old age go out everyday in the hot sun? It is time you stopped working. You are the head of the family and it is right that you should be at home to see that everything is in order. I shall do the curds-selling." Mangamma agreed. "You may take it over," she said, "I shall go one or two days in the week when I feel like it."

One day Mangamma and her daughter-in-law came together. One of them had the child in her arms and the other carried the basket. "This is my daughter-in-law, Ammayya," Mangamma said, "She does not want her old mother-in-law to work any more. She has taken me back home. She says that at my age I should not walk all this distance in the hot sun. She will bring you' curds henceforth."

And so Mangamma handed us over to her daughter-in-law. I spoke to them for some time, exhorted them to treat each other well and dismissed them with *pan-supari*.

So far I had heard only Mangamma's version of the quarrel, and I was curious to hear the other side. So one day I asked the daughter-in-law, "You seem to be a good and a sensible woman, Nanjamma. How could you drive out your own mother-in-law?"

"I would never do so, Ammayya. I am not a Rakshasi. But you see, she insists on having her own way in everything and makes a nonentity of my husband. If he is not respected as the man of the house what sort of husband would he make? What sort of wife would I be, and how can I run the house? I stood it for some time—after all she was his mother and had brought him up. But when she started saying I shouldn't beat my child I thought it was time to protest. Have I no rights as a mother?"

I smiled. "So your way of asserting your rights as a mother is to beat your child?"

"I beat him and I fondle him too. She who objects to my beating him may also object to my fondling him. She would hold me accountable for anything I may do. My son is *my* son, and my husband is *my* husband. If I do not have the right to say a word to my husband or to slap the child when he goes wrong, what sort of life would I be leading?"

If Mangamma had sounded sensible, so did her daughter-in-law.

"Now you have won your freedom?"

"Things look better. After all it is a question of adjustment. If I push the matter to the breaking point some designing person may wheedle her money out of her. There is a fellow called Rangappa. When mother-in-law lived separately he asked her to lend him money, and I heard she was willing. He said so. Then I told my son, 'Go to your grandma. She will give you sweets. Don't come back till I tell you to.' I wanted to end the quarrel and thought of this device."

"So the child did not go to her of his own accord?"

"He did, but I suggested it to him."

"Did you tell your husband of this?"

"You may be sure I did not. Men don't understand these things."

Nanjamma was certainly not inferior to Mangamma in commonsense. The struggle is still going on in that household.

That woman's son and this woman's husband — it is for him the battle is being fought. The mother is determined not to give him up and the wife is equally determined to capture him. It is difficult to speak of victory or defeat in a matter like this. The daughter-in-law is like the crocodile safe under the water, catching hold of the leg of the child. The mother is on the bank and is pulling at the hands of the child hoping to save him. The plight of the child is far from enviable. The same battle goes on in the house of Mangamma the curds-seller in the village, and of Thangamma the curds-buyer in the city. The last act of this play will never be written.

*Translated from the original Kannada
by A. N. MOORTHY RAO AND THE AUTHOR.*

AKHTAR MOHI-UD-DIN

The Bride's Pyjamas

NABIR SHALLA, the darning, was already three score and ten. He owned a ramshackle, two-windowed wooden house on the banks of the Jhelum. He sat in the verandah of this house engaged in his work, his thick glasses mounted tight on his nose, and crooned his favourite rhymes with a child-like lisp :

She brought me a goblet of wine,
And took my breath away.

Nabir Shalla had passed most of his years sitting in the verandah and all this time had remembered only two songs which he recited in season and out. The second song was :

Her skin is smooth as a ripened peach;
Oh God! Keep her safe from the world's gaze.

From early childhood there had been a curious lisp in his speech. With the loss of teeth it had become more pronounced. The little swath of grey beard shone like snow-flakes on his face as if small tufts of cotton scattered over the garment of Dame Shalla had been glued to his cheeks. In spite of a distinct tremor in his hands, he was able to make a living; indeed customers flocked to him for he was an expert at the job, many times better than most.

Nabir Shalla loved his ramshackle house and his wife Khotan Didi more than anything else in the world. Every evening she would gently press his back and caress away his day's fatigue, fetch him platefuls of hot rice, and fill his hookah *chilim*.¹ Whenever he sat in the verandah crooning his rhymes and running his

¹A clay receptacle holding tobacco and live charcoal which is placed on the nozzle of the hookah.

darning needle through a patch of *rafal*¹ cloth, she would sit in front of him, sifting cotton or spinning at her wheel. Nabir Shalla would make a sly comment, "You be the 'prentice and I the master." Pricked by his remark Khotan Didi would retort, "Why should I be the 'prentice? Why not you?"

Khotan Didi had only one tooth left in the front of her upper jaw; and since her lower lip had caved in, this tooth hung out like a nail. Her face was wrinkled like a shrunken turnip and her hair matted like dirty white cloth. It was twenty years now since she had had her last, but in her life she had been confined about ten times. Unfortunately none of her children survived except her two daughters. Both of them were now settled in their homes and had relations of their own. In their wooden shack Nabir Shalla and his wife lived reasonably well without ever encountering a serious misfortune; they had run into debt to pay for their daughters' marriage but had gradually paid off the last penny. Khotan Didi had only one regret that none of her sons lived long enough. It was rumoured that the Shallas possessed a large money-bag, worth a thousand or two. Heaven alone knew their real position; they lived off their meagre earnings and that was all.

His thick glasses mounted on his nose, Nabir Shalla worked on a piece of a *rafal* cloth today crooning his favourite rhyme with the same child-like lisp:

She brought me a goblet of wine,
And took my breath away.

By his side sat Khotan Didi at her spinning wheel humming in time to the music of the wheel. It had rained, though not for long, yet the waters of the Jhelum were muddy and the heat was oppressive. He would have preferred not to work in this heat but then he was the sole earner. Whether he liked it or not, work he must. He had begun to realise that it was his own sweat and blood that went into the mending of others' clothes. He was all in a sweat and the *rafal* cloth on his bare knee gave him much trouble. But work he must, and in order to forget

¹A warm cloth of soft fibre, usually used by the well-to-do.

his discomfort he hummed his rhymes while he worked. He finished darning a patch, and in order to cut the cord, cast about in search of his scissors. But they were not to be found anywhere; — at last he asked his wife, "Wherever have you put the scissors?"

"I put them on the shelf," she replied.

"Bring them here. I need them."

Khotan Didi had rheumatism in her legs. She could not move about and found it difficult to stand on her legs. If she had her own way she would not move about at all for the rest of her life. Yet she could not turn down her husband's request. She moved in considerable pain and began searching for the scissors. She looked on the shelf, looked into the small tin-box, but the scissors were nowhere to be found. Nabir Shalla grew impatient. He wanted to finish with his work and stretch his limbs and rest. "Look sharp! Will you?" he cried. Khotan Didi pulled a bag from the shelf; it was full of worn out children's garments and old clothes. "How very sad!" thought Khotan Didi, "The children all dead, but the clothes still intact." And one by one she remembered her children and the tears suddenly sprang to her eyes. Her flat breasts began to tingle. As she was throwing the old clothes about, she chanced upon a pair of rose-red pyjamas. These were the pyjamas she had worn on her marriage day, a long, long time ago, but they were still there — the only thing left of her dowry. Her heart gave a sudden throb as she plunged into the memories of her youth.

Khotan Didi felt abashed. She tried to keep it away from her husband but the glaring red colour of the garment screamed for attention. She blushed all over, her heart beating like that of a virgin and tongues of flame licking her entire body. She was the newly-wedded bride and Nabir Shalla her youthful groom. Images floated before her eyes of her god-mother leaving her nuptial room and of Nabir Shalla approaching. For a moment Nabir Shalla appeared before her once more as a young man. She looked sideways at her husband, who gave a chuckle and hummed his usual melody: "Her skin is smooth as a ripened peach...." Nabir Shalla appeared really young in his *pheraṇ*¹

¹A loose upper garment.

and pashmina *chaddar*¹ while a turban of the finest brand of muslin crowned his head. Here was the groom fresh from the marriage ceremonial; here was the bride weaving a net of silly ideas and anticipating the advances of Nabir Shalla with trepidation.

With persuasive softness, Nabir Shalla wheedled her, "Why don't you put on those pyjamas?" Khotan Didi blushed again. She said nothing. Nabir Shalla continued, "Come on, why not?" He let his patch of cloth drop and came near his wife, speaking with feeling, "Why do you hesitate? Put on the pyjamas. You're a nice woman."

"You're a big fool," said his wife irritably.

"But why?" asked Nabir Shalla.

Khotan Didi sat quiet and motionless. It was not easy for her to make free movements of her body.

"All right", growled Nabir Shalla, and went down the stairs. Khotan Didi felt relieved. She gathered up the clothes and put them in a bundle, but she did have a last look at the rose-red pyjamas before hiding them under a pile of rags and tossing the bundle into the shelf. She looked around for her husband. Wherever could he have gone, she reflected. But in her heart she felt a twinge of regret; why had he not forced her to wear the garment? She was sad.

It was some time before Nabir Shalla came back humming his rhymes. Khotan Didi now felt embarrassed and she blushed every time she remembered her bridal pyjamas; it was difficult for her to live down the memories of her youth. But Nabir Shalla was in a gay mood. He ascended the stairs singing softly. Now he stood before her holding a pound of mutton in his hands and handing it over to her asked, "Did you put those pyjamas on?" Then, after a pause, "What an obstinate woman you are!"

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? At your age, behaving like a monkey," his wife remonstrated.

"Ashamed?" Cried Shalla. "Aren't we man and wife?"

Khotan Didi tried to change the conversation. "What's this mutton for?" she asked.

¹A kind of shawl.

"To cook, what else?"

Khotan Didi at once realised that she had a lone tooth and Nabir Shalla none to do justice to the mutton. But Nabir Shalla was no fool. He said, "Boil it until it's soft. It won't be too hard to chew. But why, you still haven't put those pyjamas on?" He tugged at her and pouted like a baby and would not let her go. At last she agreed that Nabir Shalla should leave her alone to change into the red pair of pyjamas.

Nabir Shalla left the room and went down the stairs holding the pound of mutton in his hand. Khotan Didi shut and bolted the door. She untied the bundle quietly, passed the string through the pyjamas and changed into them. She was all a-flutter. She forgot her rheumatism for the moment and went down, looking forward nervously to her encounter with her husband. Suppose some one saw them! O my God! Whatever was he up to at this age? Oh, God, what a prospect! With her thoughts all ajumble, she entered the kitchen noiselessly.

Nabir Shalla had mounted a pot on the hearth to boil the mutton and was sitting, now singing and now blowing into the fire. Khotan Didi would have preferred to sit down without her husband noticing her, but her foot caught into a mat string and down she came with a thud. Nabir Shalla gave a start. He saw Khotan Didi prostrated on the floor and uttered a long frightened cry. But in a moment Khotan Didi lifted her chin and smiled at her husband. Nabir Shalla held her arm and helped her to get up. "You aren't hurt, I hope," Nabir Shalla spoke anxiously. Khotan Didi shook her head in reply, now thoroughly abashed. "Well, get up then," Nabir Shalla pleaded. Again the same shake of the head in reply. He insisted that Khotan Didi should stand up in her pyjamas. She tried to resist but he was on the war path. He seized her and pulled her up like one possessed and began to tease her amorously like a newly wed. Khotan Didi forgot that she was an aged woman and had grand-children; Nabir Shalla forgot that all his teeth had fallen out and that his son-in-law was already an old man. It was a marvellous sight to see Khotan Didi holding her ground and Nabir Shalla tugging at her sleeve, shoulder, or whatever he could lay his hands upon. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Somebody coughed. Nabir Shalla ran back to his place

and sat as if nothing had happened. Khotan Didi was bathed in sweat. The newcomer was none other than their elder son-in-law who had been watching their amorous antics with a puckered brow.

"Salam-alaikum," said Nabir Shalla. "Please come in."

But the son-in-law retraced his steps without saying a word, his face flushed like a red-hot flame. Khotan Didi was covered in shame like one caught red-handed. She looked guiltily at her husband, but he suddenly got up saying, "Why do you look so guilty? But why? Isn't this our home? And a man is a prince in his own home, isn't he?"

*Translated from the original Kashmiri
by MOTILAL RAINA.*

POONKUNNAM VARKEY

The Talking Plough

WHEN IT COMES TO BULLOCKS, Ouseph Chettan¹ will forget everything. ‘Bullock-mad’ is what other farmers call him. There isn’t a farmer who does not marvel at his Kannan. Kannan was Ouseph’s life. Grey in colour, sturdy in build, short, thick set curved-in horns, a magnificently shaped hump, sloping into taut skin curled up like a whirl, eyes which bulge outwards. Even Kannan’s gait had a special aplomb. In the ploughing field and other places, Kannan would invariably understand what was in Ouseph’s mind. Wherever it was, whether it was in the tool shed or in the fields, that bullock could see exactly what it was that Ouseph had in mind.

Ouseph would never use the whip on Kannan. He would only just lift it. Like other farmers, he never had to raise his voice calling the bullock this and that. He talked to Kannan as he talked to a friend. Kannan was the leader of all the other bullocks, whatever their number. When one part of the field was ploughed, he needed no prompting to move into the next. He knew how and when these things had to be done. And sometimes as he was about to step over into the next field, Ouseph would ask for a respite.

“Hey, wait a bit. Let me have a *pan*.² It’s been a long time since I have had one.”

When he hears that, Kannan will stay put. After he has chewed the soft *pan*, Ouseph will say ‘hum’ — and Kannan will start work again. When he stepped from one part of the field into the next, how carefully did he step over the low ridges! Nowhere along those low ridges would he plant his hoof. He knew that one calculated kick was enough to destroy them.

¹ lit. brother Ouseph. The term ‘Chettan’ is added to names to show affection and respect.

² betel leaf.

It was not necessary to tie up Kannan who understood everything that he was told. After the ploughing was over, he would be allowed to graze freely. When left free like that, Ouseph would just warn him: "Hey, go and find something to fill your belly. Don't you be greedy about the banana trees." And Kannan would never touch the banana trees or the young coconut palms planted with such care and labour. To ruin them, he knew, was worse than attacking those who planted them with his horns. As soon as the ploughing was over, Kannan's body would be washed clean of all the mud and dirt. Ouseph was very particular about this.

"Raise your right leg this side—why are you shaking your head? Look, you know what will happen if your horns as much as touch me! Keep quiet, don't move..." Of all this plain talk of Ouseph, Kannan would understand every word. But this was not the language Kannan particularly relished. He disliked being washed. But because of the love he had for Ouseph he would always give way. Farmers who do not know how to make use of hearts capable of love and affection would say, "Take any miserable bullock and let Ouseph feed him with his own hands just once, it will be a different animal." He would talk naturally to the bullocks. Most of the day Ouseph would wander about looking for fodder for his bullock. If you talked of the prevention of cruelty to cattle, Ouseph would lose his temper. He would ask: "Protect the cattle, we should giving one single rice field from any parish? Well? Can you protect your cattle with your beard?"

Only after Kannan had been fed would Ouseph's own hunger be appeased. It was Ouseph's belief that if the cattle us say it was the stem of tapioca that he was giving Kannan one day. He would give it to the bullock only after he had mashed it nicely. Or, let us say it was a couple of thorny leaves of a pineapple bush. He would comb out the thorns and cut the leaves nicely into pieces before offering them to the bullock.

The moment Kannan entered the compound after a stroll in the fields, Ouseph would call out to him: "Hey, Kannan."

As soon as he heard the voice, the affectionate bullock would begin to low. He would hold his head up and wait until Ouseph went up to him. A handful of green grass or a couple of banana peels—Ouseph would go to him with some little gift. Kannan would eat it out of those very hands. And as Ouseph patted him affectionately, the bullock would begin to lick him. The salt of his dry perspiration was very dear to Kannan.

Kannan could pick out Ouseph's voice from any crowd. When he heard it he was happy like a peacock at the sound of thunder. In the field he would insist on Ouseph himself being at the plough. With anyone else he would start some of his pranks. To stop that, Ouseph would have to intervene: "Don't Kannan. It is our own Kuttappan. Don't you know him?" Ouseph had to make the peace. There is an *alap*¹ of the fields, an *alap* without words or sentences. Ouseph would raise his voice to the skies singing beautifully: Ho-o-o-o. For one or two minutes the melody would stand out clearly. This music is like a pastoral version of the melodies one hears in love songs and choral songs. Perhaps it will be more correct to describe it as the sacred song or chant of the cattle. When Ouseph burst into song, Kannan would forget sickness and pain and work, and would be lost in the music.

The bells on the neck and the hooves as they sink into the soil provide the *talam*, the rhythm. One day a funny thing happened. Pachan, the son of Thundathil Kelan, was at the plough. Owing to a mild rheumatic fever, Ouseph was in bed that day. Without Ouseph's bullocks Kelan's field wouldn't have been finished that day. Ouseph therefore let him have Kannan and his mate. Kannan and his mate along with the other bullocks entered the fields. The field was furrowed once. When he started on the next round Pachan felt an urge to sing; and from behind Kannan, Pachan started an *alap* on a *raga*. As he was the most unmusical person under the sun, why did he want to sing? For no reason except that he just wanted to. Just that. When that pitiable music started, Kannan was disgusted. He registered his protest by shaking his head violently

¹An improvised piece of music.

from side to side. Pachan took no notice of this; he thought he was doing fine. One of the things about music is that the singers never realise how bad their music is. For some time Kannan made his disgust at this music obvious. But Pachan would not stop. As for Pachan's friends, every *raga* in the world was the same to them. Kannan could get no sympathy from them. Pachan had insulted music, and Kannan gave him a sharp kick on the right leg. For three days that musician had to stay at home to be massaged.

For some twelve years Kannan worked for Ouseph without respite. These years saw many spring and autumn harvests. The trees and foliages felt many winters and frosts. Many crowns and sceptres that ruling Princes used to flaunt before their subjects came toppling down. Incredible changes were taking place. A new form of Government in which man should not exploit man—this and similar happy words were raised. But Ouseph was constrained to sell his beloved bullocks. He had already mortgaged his rice-field which was his fortune. Not that he wanted to. He had no choice. He was a father. He was the loving father of a daughter past the age of marriage. Though the bridegroom's party was penniless, the impossible dowry of three thousand rupees that they asked for forced Ouseph's hand. He mortgaged the field for one thousand five hundred rupees. That was enough for the dowry. But he needed more for the wedding expenses. And for that, he had no choice but to sell his bullocks, however dear they were to him.

For some twenty years he had worked hard day and night. He was a well-known farmer. But what was the result? His hair had greyed. His eyesight was failing. He had wrinkled. He had grown rheumatic. His hands had so hardened with work that no knife could pierce the flesh. What could he do? He had been working with implements some five thousand years old. The soil had lost its fertility. No manure was to be had. Ouseph finally took his stand by the *Rig Veda* hymns. To help protect the land that was his be all and end all, he prayed to the god of the waters, to the clouds, to the mountains, to the god of wind. From the futility of those years of prayers he hasn't yet recovered. But shops have increased and so have

ways of exploitation. Such things which are an affront to him are on the increase.

Ouseph wasn't present at the time of Kannan's sale. A fee of a rupee was due to him for the deed of sale. But he left the scene with tears which no amount of rupees would have stopped. Kannan hated leaving the premises. He lifted his head and looked all round to see if his master, the life of his life, was there. Feeling that something was wrong, he lowed once or twice. At that time under the southern jack-fruit tree Ouseph stood wiping his tears, silent, wordless.

Love does not always call for words and demonstrations. If love is the nearness of hearts that know sorrow, there were no two closer to each other than Ouseph and Kannan. And they didn't tell each other their troubles. So it pained those two hearts all the more.

Helpless and dishonoured in one's own camp, a soldier may sometimes look at the enemy's. When helpless and dishonoured in one's own village, some farmers look to Vayanad.¹

"An unknown and unheard of land. Impossible for friends and relatives to reach. And a place where malaria plays havoc. How, dear Ouseph, knowing all this, can we let you go there?" asked Kittussar, Ouseph's neighbour. Ouseph was enquiring about the prospects of Malabar.

"What else shall I do, Kittussar? Give me a little land with some life in it. If I can't smell the earth, my mind will turn to ashes," said Ouseph.

Ouseph's life, a life of pain, drifts like a listless wind. His Malabar trip gets postponed everyday. Not only that. He wants to sell the seven cents of land on which he is now living, for a reasonable price. Another problem. Ouseph's daughter Katrikutti is pregnant. Secretly he longs to see the first born and its little face.

Came Easter, the end of the Lent season. For Christians this is a day of rejoicing, even in the poorest home. This is the day when the lovely smell of cooking meat emanates from every kitchen. And in the frying pan, the *appams*² make hissing

¹ A place in Malabar, where land is comparatively cheaper.

² White rice cakes.

noises and proclaim their intoxicating smell. Hot meat stew flavoured with curried leaves and chopped coconuts, and some pancakes, and a couple of plates. This is happiness. On this fine day there will be few houses without them. But Ouseph sat there yearning for something. Someone is ploughing the field nearby. He could hear the lovely chant of the ploughman. It burns into his heart, a farmer's heart. Looking at the cobweb-ridden plough resting high up in the stable, his chest heaves with a sigh. Would he ever again have in his life a pair of bullocks like Kannan, some four or five acres of good land, and use this plough? Would he have the good fortune to see such a day, thought Ouseph in his helplessness.

"How long are you going to stay like this, man? What has happened has happened. Shouldn't you go to Kottayam?¹ Don't you have to give away your daughter tomorrow? After all, aren't you a father?" Ouseph's wife Maria reproached the speechless man.

He must send their daughter to her husband's home the very next day. He hasn't given her the clothes she ought to have. Not that he did not want to, only he was short of money. Her mother-in-law and her sisters-in-law had all begun to taunt her and speak sarcastically of her. It was in her mother Maria that Katrikutti confided all these things. Somehow or other he had to give her three pieces of cloth² and three bodices. He could ignore the rest. This he could no longer overlook. While he was despairing of the means for that, he had a stroke of luck. Maria came into a *chitty*³ for twenty rupees. They had been managing that *chitty* by tightening their belts in the face of hunger and taking care of every grain of rice. Maria held this money in her hand when she reproached him.

He couldn't manage it, but she had made it possible. Ouseph decided to go shopping and got up. "Father, please see that the cloth for the blouses is a little thick." Katrikutti cautioned her father.

"We haven't paid the land tax. Please pay that too," said

¹ Name of the nearest town.

² A woman's dress in Kerala generally consists of a long piece of cloth wrapped round the waist and a bodice.

³ An indigenous method of raising loans.

Maria.

"You want the whole kingdom — and for all that, this is what you have got," said Ouseph.

"Well, whatever you do, I must have one piece of cloth myself. The one round my waist is threadbare," said Maria.

"Then do this. You go yourself. I shall stay in the kitchen," said Ouseph.

"Then, hand over your beard too," Maria said, looking down. Katrikutti put her hand over her mouth and suppressed her laugh.

"Yes, I have a beard all right. But I won't have any nonsense from borrowed beards," Ouseph retorted. He continued: "If you had a beard as well, you wouldn't leave a single man in this parish alone."

Ouseph tucked his umbrella under his arm, put a towel on his shoulders, and tucked some *pan* into his waist, and started.

The Easter celebration and its bustle and excitement were no less in Kottayam. None of the Christian shops was open. But there were many clothiers. He went into one or two shops and made enquiries about the price and quality of various types of cloth.

"My goodness, what a price!" It was the old man's opinion that the price of cloth was exorbitant. "Anyhow let me enquire at two or three more shops. One never knows where one can get them at an anna less." He went round the shops like that. And as he walked, he reached the gate of the Municipal building. There, just outside the wall, a number of bullocks had been placed in a row. You could count every rib in their body. They were just skin and bones. Old ones who had come to the end of their lives; some with broken tails; some with the hard marks of carts on their necks acquired through long years; some with old stunted horns; some proclaiming the poverty of man's kindness to living things — you could see many such things among those bullocks. On every one of their bodies the Municipality had stamped the black mark of death. Whatever is left in them was going to provide the meat for the Easter festivities. The Municipality took strict action against any butcher who should slaughter animals who weren't so marked. The Municipality which above everything else took care of the

health of the public, never relaxed this test. But for this test the butchers would slaughter any rotten cattle that was to be had, regardless of any risk to human life. In that matter Ouseph was a great supporter of the Municipality. For most of those bullocks death would be a relief. Because this was some exculpation. When they were able, they worked unendingly. When weak they were fated to cruelty and abuse. How much better is death to cruelty and contempt. Ouseph stood there and watched that sight for some time. It touched his compassionate heart. Altogether there were some forty heads and more cattle were being brought in by farmers to be branded. Ouseph looked on them as friends condemned to death and moved northward.

Suddenly he shuddered. It was unbelievable. He wondered whether his failing eyesight was not cheating him as he saw an animal of skin and bones. The old man's heart sank. Everything went black. He shivered. Yes, it was Kannan.

"Kannan!" he cried out from the bottom of his heart. In one jump he darted towards the animal. The sound of that voice which used to give comfort and hope to the beast, made it go numb all over. Kannan was standing with his head low in front of the magnificent building. Life once again echoed in his ears. He raised his head and looked round. "Do you recognise me, son? Is it in this state that I have to see you?" He clasped the animal to his heart throbbing with love and stroked its forehead. As it felt the touch of those hands, it raised its tail. And it cried, not through its mouth, but through its heart. Ouseph wanted to see if Kannan's body had been branded. Yes, there it was, clear on its foreleg. He tried to wipe it out. But the black mark of the Municipality could not be wiped out so easily.

Under his belly, Kannan had a festering wound. Flies were pestering him.

"Was this bullock yours once?" one of the butchers asked Ouseph.

"Was it you who brought him here?" Ouseph asked him.

"Yes," answered the butcher.

Kannan began to lick his dear master's sweating body. He had given most of his life to cool that sweat. Even at the end

of his time he would lick that sweat. It was a sweat which tasted good to his mouth and was part of his life. The hot tears of the old farmer fell on Kannan's face.

"Let go. It is late. I have to deliver his meat at the shop before noon," the shopkeeper said to the two of them talking to each other. One of the merchants who had started out with two or three bullocks signed for Kannan to be taken along. Yes, in an hour or two Kannan would provide meat for the Easter feast.

It was getting dark. "Sweep this seat before you light the lamp, dear," said Maria who was waiting for Ouseph to her daughter.

"Why is father so late?" enquired Katri.

"He has gone for a purpose. Let him come," Maria consoled her.

"If he has gone to Kottayam, he should have returned earlier than this." Katri who had been waiting for her cloth and blouse pieces was impatient. She kept her eyes fixed on the road. Maria also kept looking. There was no Ouseph to be seen. They lit the lamp.

Below, she saw a white figure. "Here is father. Yes, yes, it is father," Katri said in delight. She was happy it was she who saw him first. Mother and daughter stood looking with one thought.

"Is it Ouseph himself?" asked their neighbour Mathew. He was a tailor. The three blouses had to be made that night. Katri had to leave in the morning. Mathew had been asked to stand by so that everything could go as planned.

In front of those young eyes longing to see her cloth pieces, Ouseph entered with Kannan.

"Goodness, it is Kannan," Katri said with astonishment.

"Where is the cloth? Was it this that you bought?" asked Maria. Kannan entered his old courtyard and lowed with happiness.

They plied him with a thousand questions and shouted, raising their voices high.

Ouseph sat there, silent, supporting his chin with his hands. Maria shook with despair. Katri cried unable to suffer her sorrow. Ouseph did not say a word. His body was wet with perspiration.

"Father, I never thought you would do this to me," said Katri with tears in her eyes.

"My child," her father said with his voice choking, "to me Kannan is the same as you. The butcher...." He wiped his tears with his towel. He couldn't finish that sentence. That night was a cruel night. They spent the hours without a wink of sleep.

Day dawned. Ouseph made an ointment for the fester on Kannan's belly and went into the stable. It was a first class ointment, that. For the diseases of cattle Ouseph knew some rare specific remedies. He prepared one of these even before the sun rose and entered the stable with the medicine. "Stretch your legs, lift up your head." Kannan was lying down.

"Kannan!" he called. Ouseph's heart melted. Kannan wouldn't wake up any more. Perhaps he made his exit from this world because he couldn't bear to see the family hurting Ouseph.

Above the dead body of Kannan and the broken heart of Ouseph was the cobweb-ridden plough, and on it a little lizard chirped sadly.

*Translated from the original Malayalam
by NARAYANA MENON*

'ROOP KATTHAK'

Manu

EVEN NOW I can hardly recollect where I first saw Manu. Somehow when I try to do so I connect her with the thick, dark yellow fog of a London evening and the rush of traffic on Tottenham Court Road. Perhaps I saw her somewhere there waiting for a bus in late autumn. But then I remember having seen her in the spring too, offering crumbs to the swans in the lake on Hampstead Heath; and I also remember seeing her near the Stoll theatre, with a book in one hand and munching a sandwich from the other. All these visions and more come to my mind; and then I give up trying to find out the historical truth.

One could hardly say where and when one would see her. And that is why her appearance was never out of the way. Every time she was busy with something different. Sometimes she looked upon the bustle around her so innocently that you would think she was some philosopher cogitating about the beginning and end of the world. Sometimes she would be equally merry and enjoy the life around her. But one could never dip into her mind; and, in her case, this was so casual, so natural, that there was no room for complaint or explanation. I always thought, however, on all these several occasions that there was something distinguished about her, and that though one could not say what, I alone had found it. For a moment when I saw her I forgot everything. I also imagined that I would never see her again. And still I would feel like attaching myself to her with ties of endless ages and again not attaching, both at the same time. Not that this cannot be explained. One wants a thing intensely, but it is not at all unnatural to find oneself divided; both desiring and not desiring it, a little afraid that one will not get it. But I had never thought of Manu so dispassionately. I doubt if I can do so even now.

During those first days whenever I saw her I thought she

almost beckoned me. Every time I felt like approaching her on my own and finding an excuse to talk to her. But I would be so embarrassed by the thought that I would not be able to see her again that I was powerless to do anything at all. I felt she understood all this tumult in my heart. I interpreted her look, her laugh and her movements so as to comfort myself. Though later I discovered that I was right, I was quite unaware of it then.

When she was out of sight I always felt that I would never see her again. I hardened my heart and forgot her — tried to forget her, and then I would see her again somewhere unexpectedly, and the wheel would start again. During those first few months I must not have seen her more than half a dozen times; but it felt as if I had seen her ever so often.

Once I saw her waiting for the bus at about six o'clock in the evening. I was going home from the college library. I halted for a while when I saw her. And then she herself called me near and handing over the two books she was holding, quickly disappeared into a nearby lane, saying, "I'll be back in a minute!" I don't know why, but this time I thought she would be back, that she would speak to me and that I would really get to know her. I cannot say that I thought so simply because I was holding her books as a trust in my hand. By this time I had forgotten everything around me. With a vague idea that I would find her identity, I turned the cover of the first book :

'Manuela Hartmann,
Wien'

So she was from Vienna, Austria. Manuela. Manuela. I indianised her name on the spot into Manu. At that moment she came back. She had a bag in her hand. "I have brought some sandwiches. Let's go for a walk on the heath." Without allowing me to say a thing, she took my hand into hers and started walking. Manu....Manu....Manu....I was chanting in my mind. Later I got to know that the tube was more convenient for going to the heath than the bus.

After that we started meeting frequently. It was she who decided the time and the place, and she kept the rendezvous without fail. It was she again who did most of the talking. I only listened quietly to her. Her accents were so sweet and

queer that one felt like cancelling all the traditional pronunciations of the English language and substituting hers. She would suddenly clap her hands, and with half closed eyes say 'Ja, Ja' (Yes, yes), and start laughing with her palms on her thighs. When she talked like that I would remember the talk of our own women in South Kanara. They, too, have a similar charm and give a rare sweetness to the most simple remark.

When she talked Manu could do without a specific topic. She had her own opinion about a number of things. The sky she said was a big blue sea. She particularly liked my dark skin. One of her theories was that the ancestors of the European people were originally from India and that they spread from the land and came to Europe. She maintained her argument by saying that it was natural for human habitation to start in a place amply blessed by Nature. She would end the discussion by taking both my hands and pressing the palms just a little under her neck. This was her practical way of showing how race differences had grown with the passage of time. When she talked thus, it was no use arguing with her. Contest her point a little, disagree with her slightly, and she would leave the topic. Instead it was more worth while to bow to her and forget everything else in the course of her talk. Such restraint had its fitting reward—novel and unexpected every time!

Though we met from time to time, I never knew what Manu really did. I couldn't ask her directly. Once she casually said that she painted and that she had come to England to learn painting. I thought if one really wanted to study painting one would rather go to Paris or to an Italian city. England was hardly the place. I didn't of course wish to contradict her. She confused life in the real so readily with life in the imagination that one could not rely on any of her statements in the normal sense of the word. One never wanted to.

I thought perhaps she worked as a model and then I felt a little alarmed, I don't know why. I had read all kinds of things about artists' models in novels and stories. Actually she was fit enough to be a model. She could keep an expression steady for hours on end with the same ease with which her face reflected her changing moods. While talking she would push her lower lip to the right and open her eyes fully—and stay thus for a

long time. Once she held her breath and kept silent so long that I really got nervous. Who could refuse such an ideal model?

When she met me after a week, she had a paper bag in her hand. She took out a picture from it and handed it to me. The picture was in simple line and wash, in the Japanese style. One can barely describe it as a creamwhite peacock with raised plumage, dancing with its right leg uplifted. Actually the picture was so beautiful that one almost expected the peacock to lower the right leg and lift the other and start dancing. I stared at the picture for a while and then did something I shouldn't have done, at least where Manu was concerned. "Did you really draw this picture?" I asked her. She took the picture quietly from my hand and tore it to bits. Her face betrayed no feeling. If she had been angry, if she had severely chided me, I wouldn't have minded. But she did nothing of the sort.

I did not see her again.

Properly speaking, a literary story should have ended at this stage. But stories in real life do not end in this way. One begets another—like the sprouts in a bamboo grove—and then one doesn't know where the real story started and where it ended. Lying on the grass of the heath Manu had told me once that all things happen at the same time. I did not grasp her meaning even though I claimed to be a student of philosophy. In her own words one could explain her remark thus: "I talk and there are waves in the air. Where do they go? Hither and thither. Some get entangled, some stumble. But not one is destroyed. It is not in the nature of things. Nature preserves everything. And then they all quiver at the same time. One who wants to can hear them." As she talked she grew so serious that she might have been listening to all the sound waves in the universe. I asked her gently so as not to break her serenity, "What do you hear now?" She was quick to reply, "When you were fourteen you lost your way in the sands of a sea-shore. It was dark before you expected it to be, and, frightened, you started calling me. I am hearing those cries." I was astounded. It had happened almost exactly like that six years back when I had been to my uncle's at Kundapur, and I had been rebuked for reaching home late. The only difference in detail was that

I was not fourteen but sixteen then and that I had with me Nirmala—Nima—from the house next door. I did not call anybody, however. I was thinking of Nima and, more than her, of her father, with a beating heart. The similarity that struck me was between the consonants of the two names ‘Manuela’ and ‘Nirmala.’

I learnt from this incident that persons and events are few in life. Their novelty is for us to find and we have to produce ever new notes from the same tune. Manu could do this with great ease; no event was unexpected for her; she accepted everything quite naturally. For her, it was all in a day’s work as they say. Because of this attitude she never felt embarrassed. To feel embarrassed is to object to the acceptance of whatever exists, whatever faces one as the truth. She didn’t like that; she wouldn’t have managed it.

Sometimes I wonder whether I am right in interpreting Manu’s behaviour this way. Did she herself understand the meaning of it? Actually these are minor matters. Knowledge comes at a later stage; it requires comprehensive thinking about everything. Everyday life does not wait for it. Manu had discovered this....

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were strolling one day on the bridge over the river Hao. Chuang Tzu said, “Look how the minnows dart hither and thither where they will. Such is the pleasure that fish enjoy!” Hui Tzu said, “You are not a fish? How do you know what gives pleasure to fish?” Chuang Tzu said, “You are not I. How do you know that I do not know what gives pleasure to fish?” Hui Tzu said, “If because I am not you, I cannot know whether you know, then equally because you are not a fish, you cannot know what gives pleasure to fish. My argument still holds.” Chuang Tzu said, “Let us go back to where we started. You asked me how I knew what gives pleasure to fish. But you already knew how I knew it when you asked me. You knew that I knew it by standing here on the bridge at Hao. Every knowledge is of this kind. It cannot be had by argument.”

And that was why Manu rarely asked questions on her own. If she did, it was an aside and her answer followed immediately. A question meant uncertainty which she could never

tolerate. Once however she asked me a question about myself. She asked me, "What are you going to be?" I said simply, "When I go back to Mysore I'll be a professor in the Maharajah's College. That's the reason our government has sent me here on a scholarship. I want also to write a lot on philosophy." She did not speak for a long time. I thought perhaps she was unhappy over the suggestion of the parting to come in what I had said. A little later she said, "Don't you like to be Roop?" and got up to go.

It was days later that I understood the real implication of what she had said. To be is after all to give scope to what is. It doesn't require effort, but choice, definitely. One does not feel any strain when one is doing what one likes. Everything takes place naturally. All the faculties work hand in hand. One can't bear waiting for a train even for five minutes, but one doesn't feel the strain even when one is tired after waiting for one's dear one.

Once I was more than half an hour late in arriving at Holborn station. I was considerably nervous. But as soon as I saw Manu's familiar face, my feelings steadied as if they had been coaxed into calm. "I am late," I said. She said, "No, you were here all the time. For a few moments you would be that pillar over there and play hide-and-seek with another pillar. Sometimes you would be this ticket machine near me and try to deceive me. Just now you became a small child and clung to my leg." She said this so casually that we both started laughing.

In everything, she was so simple and innocent. And, therefore, sometimes one didn't know how to behave with her. As our experience of the world grows, our behaviour becomes more and more rigid. All effort is directed towards preparing schedules of behaviour and then checking them. We start believing that society would not work without them. Besides, it is also true that it would drive us to madness if we decided each thing anew everytime. When one thought of Manu one felt all this was useless. Truthfully speaking, if one decides to act on one's own counsel, one need not find an excuse for it. Acting on other people's sweet little whims, however, makes one find out excuses to convince oneself; and once this becomes a

habit, we try to see which particular set rule fits which particular thing. We almost forget whether we want that thing or not.

Once when we had been to Ireland, Manu, without any reserve whatsoever, got up in the course of conversation, and, taking off all her clothes, entered the waters of Loch Alan. I was no swimmer, but I was astounded at this action of hers. I was all the while afraid that someone might see us. How beautiful she appeared in water and more beautiful still when, after coming out, she stood immobile for a while without any hurry, like Ingres' 'La Source' — all this was like a dream to me then . . . and therefore I was powerless to accept what was the truth. If Manu had not rushed all wet and flung herself on me, I would never have discovered that truth....

It is said there was a sin-fearing Brahmin. Once God suddenly smiled on him, and asked, "Speak, what shall I give you?" The Brahmin was so bewildered by this sudden blessing that he told God, "Oh Benefactor, I can't think of a thing. I shall think and tell you tomorrow. I must ask my wife. I must consult my elders." God said, "All right." The next day the Brahmin got tired of waiting for God. The God that had once smiled did not appear again.

Manu rarely mentioned the past or the future when she talked. It was as if she realised fully that each moment was a thing in itself and thus to be experienced. No wonder her appearance was always wholly befitting the occasion. When I consider why she did not meet me again after the incident of the peacock picture, I feel that in a way she was not being her true self. My remark hurt her ego. She lost faith in me; the dream world that she had built deep down in her was shaken. These obvious explanations occur to me, too. But a little more thinking makes me see her behaviour then in a different light. For her it was not important who had drawn the picture. More important was its quality and what it communicated. I think there couldn't be — there wasn't — any apparent relation between this incident and her disappearance thereafter.

Manu's unforeseen disappearance almost stunned me for a few days. I couldn't think of anything. Fortunately, my examination was then approaching. I seriously thought of ap-

plying myself completely to my studies, forgetting whatever had passed. I could put into practice much of this resolution. In a way I felt it was my duty to search for her. It was callous to surrender to the circumstances, carrying on as if nothing had happened after all these days of close companionship. I also wondered if she hadn't put an end to her life. And then I would think it was no use testing one's luck. My pride echoed this thought. What had I done that she should break all relations so suddenly? Why should I dance to the tune of her fancy? Part of my thinking was witness to the great role of love; part was full of the selfishness of love.

I think so long as everything goes on smoothly, one does not feel like thinking; thoughts don't just occur. Knowledge dawns when the way is blocked. I used to admire Manu because she never felt the need of such thinking. In a way her life, was fully lived on the biological plane. The secret of this lies in re-echoing, in responding; it has no place for personal consideration. It proves spontaneously the oneness of hunter and hunted, master and disciple, lover and loved, killer and killed. This is the philosophical secret of life on a biological plane. I don't think one can say anything more about it. Only he can be said to have caught this secret whose behaviour is at no point inconsistent and appears to be proper in the very first instance. Man does not find the time to separate thought and deed in his behaviour. When Manu lay motionless on the grass for hours on end, or seized my hair with her plump fingers and bent over me, laughing and crying at the same time, so as to smother me — then I would catch this secret of hers a little. She made every moment hers and made it incomparably beautiful.

Once she said to me, "I want to learn a lot." "What do you want to learn?" I asked. She said, "Everything, and from everybody. You don't require a subject to learn. Yesterday a boy taught me how to make a paper plane. Wait, I will make one for you." And she picked up a piece of paper from my table and started making a plane. Her demeanour and enthusiasm at the time were like those of a seven-year old. "What did you learn from me?" I asked her. She held my hands in hers and placed them on her knees; and dipping me in her large eyes, she said, "You taught me to forget myself. Once I was quite proud.

But I saw you and changed once for all." I said, "You are always the same. You are just flattering me." She said, "You don't know me yet. Some day you will know. He who gives does not know the thing he gives." I, too, told her, "I have also learnt something from you." She said, "Yes, I know. To talk without any rhyme or reason!" "No. To be docile like the last princess in the fairy tale." At that moment she got up, laughing. I handed her with her coat and, while putting it on, I rested my chin on her left shoulder. Just for an instant she held my left hand and pressed it over her heart and patted my left cheek with the tips of the fingers of her right hand. And then she left. I had never felt so happy....

If satisfaction can be considered a state of mind, happiness may be called the realisation of life itself—be it for a moment. With studied effort and application one can make satisfaction a part of one's self. At the root of satisfaction is the desire to override circumstances. Happiness is timid and shy. One cannot calculate when and how one will get it. I remember an incident when, after the examination, I journeyed to Vienna hoping by chance to find Manu. The train was crowded. Beside me was a girl in her teens. Most probably it was the first time she was going so far and travelling alone. When it was dark, everybody gradually started dozing. I was not sleepy—I never am in a train. And yet I think I slept for a while, for, when I woke up, I found the girl fast asleep with her head on my shoulder. Suddenly I felt like disappearing with her, drifting together far away in a flood of extreme compassion. I did not move, so as not to disturb her. I remembered Karna offering his thigh as a pillow to Parashuram. The whole night I stayed in the same position. The feeling I had then—what I feel today as I recollect it—that I can call happiness. If I had told Manu of this incident she would have liked it. She would have wholeheartedly admired me.

I went to Vienna. Stayed there for a few days. Saw the palaces and the museums. Did what everybody does. Omitted nothing. And then suddenly one day culled another moment of happiness. Vienna stands on the bank of the Danube. This river that springs from the innermost dark forests of Germany and meets the Black Sea in the East traverses so many different

lands, making them rich, that she can truly be called the Great Mother of Central Europe. She is *the* Mother of the Aryans, for the historians tell us that they came from her valleys. You can sail on the river in boats big and small. That day I had got up early and was waiting on the pier in front of my hotel, enjoying the sight of the waters. Suddenly somebody at my back said, "Would you come along with us? It will be a pleasure." I turned, and saw a young couple. The girl had a yellow dress with pink and blue flowers on it. She had covered her hair with a pale violet kerchief of silk. The young man had a cane hamper in his hand. Both of them looked so happy and eager that I got aboard along with them without any fuss. You come across a lot of people in Europe who act so informally; it is a part of their culture. In the boat we chatted a lot. The young man seemed to be very talkative. We stood leaning on the rail of the deck. Suddenly he said to me, "What do you think is the colour of the water?" I said, "Blue." "Then surely you are in love!" he said eagerly. "I think the water is dark green," said the girl dissembling a sigh, "Nobody loves me." Both of them laughed freely over this. By this time, I too had joined their company so completely that I myself could not help laughing. How simple and touching is this poem of the Blue Danube! Everyone sees the river water is blue. But there is a traditional belief that only those who are in love see it so. That means ultimately that all are in love. Is this not a poem of universal love? I thought that on that occasion Manu was with me, flitting near me. I saw her face everywhere. And I don't know why, but my heart felt light. I could see everything clearly. I forgot everything in the company of those newly made friends. I became one of them. When the boat touched the pier again, we decided to meet again and said goodbye. While leaving, the girl bent forward unexpectedly and kissed me on the left cheek. I had not known such a natural token of friendship.

Now Manu was not mine. She belonged to everybody. And therefore I could approach her closer. I didn't any longer feel like returning early to the hotel. I thought that I was everywhere, in everything. The rush of traffic and the bustle on the street, the silent colloquy of couples walking hand in

hand, a boy swaggering along whistling, with his hands in the pockets of his shorts, a spritely old man halting suddenly while counting every step and looking back, a young girl neatly walking to work with hurried steps and the feeling that she carried the burden of the whole world — now I knew the secret of all these, I wanted to enjoy it again and again. I did not want to waste a bit of it.

At that very moment I had grasped the secret of Manu's life. Within the short span of four and a half months it was she who had showed me all the ways to heaven and to hell. There was nothing left to give and to take. The furore of a stormy sea and the stillness of an October night, the smile of Mona Lisa and the tears of Tess, tall upright trees and the grass flowers bathed in the morning dew — she had unlocked the mystery of these for me. In a way Manu was my Krishna. Krishna responded to every mood of Radha, grew big or small for her sake. Her behaviour was likewise without precedent. Krishna left for Mathura and Radha's life was over — we think it was over. But actually it was not so. Radha herself was now full of Krishna. Her life had only started.

I entered the hotel. Before I reached the lift, the porter brought me a letter and a small parcel. My London bank had redirected both of them.

In my room I proceeded to open the envelope and read the letter. There was no mention of either date or place. Fancy, yellowish paper and across it the darling letters which I was used to and had accepted as my very own. Manu had never written me such a long letter. Just a sentence or two, only the salutation on a picture post-card with the letter of her name peeping through a lot of stylised lines like fragile flowers down below — that was the extent of her correspondence up till now. But this letter was different. Eight pages of it. As if it contained her whole life —

"I am sure you won't be surprised on reading this letter. By this time you must have steadied yourself and be ready to fight the world anew. Perhaps you have forgotten me. But where I am there is nothing except you."

"You won't possibly call this a letter. For me this is a fulfilment of a promise I made once to myself."

"My mother died soon after giving birth to me. That was during the last war. My father died when I was two. I was brought up by my aunt at Salzburg. I became one of her family. People would have envied me in those days—every fancy, every air of mine was encouraged. Auntie had two daughters and one son. But she did not treat me differently from them. I was the youngest, and, therefore, constantly petted. Auntie's husband was an architect. After the war he received profitable commissions. He made money. Karl, my cousin, was a student in Vienna. My other two cousins were soon married. It was decided to send me to a convent school in Switzerland for the time being. I had just completed fifteen years and passed on to sixteen.

"This school is some distance away from Interlaken. What did I learn there? To swim by stealth and to love our teacher of French. Sister Helena was so beautiful that every time I looked at her my heart stopped and started beating doubly fast. She looked like a Venus de Milo draped as a convent nun. Her bearing and behaviour were so measured and courteous that one felt like rubbing one's cheek for ever, without a word, at her arm covered by a sleeve of spotlessly white linen. She loved all of us, and that made everybody feel that she loved her alone. The girls used to quarrel over her, sometimes openly.

"One night when all was quiet I jumped out of the window and went for a swim to my favourite place near the lake. It was a summer's day in July. I don't know a greater happiness than planning a lot of things for the whole day and then forgetting them all while jostling with the waters at night. The particles of water seem to enter every pore of the body, thus liberating it, making life so different. All these days I was under the impression that my corner near the lake was secret—was mine alone. But on that day somebody had preceded me there. I could hear expert strokes in the water from time to time. At first I was scared. But I would not turn back. I was anxious to identify this intruder. I hid myself behind a tree. Suddenly the water was still and a little later I could see somebody on the edge of it. From a distance it was impossible to place the person. But I was sure of one thing. It had been swimming in the nude, like myself. Slowly it came near. I stretched my

eyes and watched. And then my heart stopped and started beating doubly fast. My feet were rooted into the place. I felt like shouting loudly Before I knew I ran and clung to Sister Helena's legs.

"She raised me quietly. She was neither shocked nor embarrassed. She said, 'Wait a minute,' and started putting on her clothes. I sat down first with my head in my knees, and then, strangely enough started looking at everything without blushing. She dried her body with a napkin as small as a kerchief; and then started putting on the paraphernalia of her dress one by one—quickly and neatly. I had never thought that the nuns in a convent wore so many clothes! And yet, through all this covering, Sister Helena looked fresh as a flower in bloom. After she finished dressing she carried her shoes and socks to the place where I was sitting. I almost felt like getting up quickly, picking them up from her hands, and before putting them on like rubbing my cheeks on her blood red soles and kissing them gently. She seemed to know my wish instinctively. She put down her shoes, and as she sat down she handed me her tiny napkin. I dried her feet and put on her socks as I wanted to, and put on the shoes.

"Then she said to me, 'Do you want to enter the water? Go if you like. I'll wait for you here.' I shook my head and then blurted out, 'Some day we shall both go together.'

"We sat there a long time huddled close together. (After that night for the first time I entered the waters of Loch Alan when I was with you.)

"The next day I was almost floating in air. I went on as if I had realised all the happiness in the world. When our eyes met in the classroom, my heart danced I couldn't think of anything else.

"That evening, after vespers, Sister Helena was crossing the quadrangle on her way to her room. Without anyone noticing I broke out of the girls' line and ran towards her. 'Come to the lamp-post in the back yard after supper,' she said and went her way. I could not bear the waiting. I was utterly restless.

"The moment approached. A minute passed, and then two. I was standing near the lamp, anxiously waiting for Sister

Helena. Suddenly she came. She gave me a book which looked like an album and said, 'Keep it with you. It's for you.' Before I could say anything she caressed my hair and left me. I could not think of anything. I held the book close to my heart and instantly hid it inside my gown. I couldn't look at it that night. All the girls slept together in the dormitory; it was impossible to take it out there. All night it lay hidden, making its presence felt near my heart.

"The next day during lunch I realised that Sister Helena was not at her table. Suddenly I felt I was sinking. I did not care for the food. I had not even had a look at the album-like book I had received the previous night. After the meal I asked Elsa, the maid. Her reply made me terribly nervous. Sister Helena had been sent to a convent in Spain that very morning. She did not know anything more. I couldn't ask any one else either.

"That night I fell ill. When the illness persisted, they telegraphed my people. I must then have been taken home to Salzburg, for I remember the events of that week so vaguely even today. During those days I was busy with one thing alone — rummaging through the album or diary (I don't know what to call it) given by Sister Helena. The picture of the peacock that I gave you was based on a sketch in this very diary. You will see for yourself that this diary has more of these little sketches than words.

"And then one day I decided to take up art. It was like a message from Sister Helena. I was given all the materials. I made it a point to visit every museum in Austria. It was decided to send me first to London and then to Paris. When we met I was a student in the Slade School.

"Sister Helena has noted on a page in her diary: 'One must not try to reach the very core of a flower. There can be only a void there; for the sake of the flower it must remain so. The flower as well as the connoisseur must heed this warning. This nameless void is for him in whose heart the flower and its entire world have blossomed in all their majesty.' When I saw you first I realised the truth of this idea. I was convinced that with you my heart's fortune will remain eternal and pure.

"Perhaps you will think I toyed with your life. But really,

Roop, I didn't do anything of this kind. Sister Helena left me the legacy of her innermost thoughts and I am passing it on to you through this letter. You are my legatee. You can think. You can express your thoughts in simple words. Tell this to all. Those who understand will be our heirs in the near future.

"Where am I now? — You'll ask. I am in a small village in the Tyrol. I roam a lot, work in a farm and draw. One day, when you want me with all the fulness of your heart, I shall come to you. Till then and for ever....

Yours
Manu"

It is sixteen years since Manu wrote that. As time passes the memories of her become more vivid and intense. She hasn't yet come. The diary of her teacher, Sister Helena, is so full of the richness of the heart that even after all these years I have not been able to fathom it. Some day I must publish this diary itself — but only when its words and lines have become mine.

*Translated from the original Marathi
by P.S. REGE*

KALINDI CHARAN PANIGRAHI

Only A Dog

JOLLY and Albion were friends from childhood. On no account would they remain apart from each other. Albion was an English greyhound, his ancestors hailing from England; hence his name. Jolly was an antelope from the wilds of Orissa. Albion was thoroughly carnivorous and Jolly a strict vegetarian.

Jolly fell ill and Albion stayed near her day and night—so much so that he had to be given food there by her side. Albion once broke his leg. Jolly, being well aware of his immense physical strength, was at a loss to make out the reason for his long confinement. She lavished all her affection on Albion. Albion came round at last—as though healed by Jolly's nursing and began walking slowly. But when the spring came, bringing along its great floral wealth, the two friends played about and ran like mad in the direction of the southwind, to explore as it were, the mysterious world whence this stream of delight came flooding. As he ran Albion appeared like a thread straightened out on the ground, with his limbs hardly to be distinguished from his body. But Jolly's race was a veritable Paris dance. Her legs seemed to float over the surface of the ground. She was simply dancing on air.

The zamindar was very fond of the two animals. When, after the day's heavy work, he came out for a stroll on the extensive lawn in front of his office, these two creatures amused him with their sportive movements. As the master walked on, Jolly rubbed her long neck against his legs and licked his hands. If Albion remained behind, he came swiftly running ahead, prostrated before his master, waving his tail submissively. Sometimes he found his way in between his two legs and thus made him slacken his pace.

If other dogs appeared, looking greedily at Jolly, she would shrink back with fear and take shelter by her master's

side. Then Albion would come forward, prepared to fight his kinsfolk, who would meekly retire with tails tucked in between their legs. They were not unaware of Albion's great strength. He too held his prestige high, for he disdained to pursue a running dog.

Another friend of Jolly and Albion was the zamindar's beloved daughter. She passed most of her time with the two animals. With an ayah in charge of her she plucked soft blades of grass from the garden when Jolly came with slow steps and gently presented her mouth to the girl. Albion too swiftly followed his companion and displayed diverting tricks to please his little mistress.

Swinging in his easy chair in the verandah the zamindar watched the sportive pranks of his pets and his care-worn heart filled with joy. He was a man of up-to-date ideas, pleasant and polite in his manners. He dressed as occasion required, appearing in pure 'swadeshi' *kurta* and *chaddar* before his countrymen, and in a smart European suit before foreigners. European officers of rank would come during holidays for shikar in the jungles of his estate. To them his friendly doors were ever open. A well-equipped guest house had been specially erected for the purpose. He was equally hospitable towards his educated and respectable tenants, and they never failed to receive courteous treatment from him. Notwithstanding this, the opinion of the public in general was not very favourable to him. He was degraded and irreligious, according to the orthodox, and was accused by others of being a reckless and extravagant oppressor. Above all, his close contact with Europeans and his adoption of some of their customs had impaired his many virtues in the eyes of his countrymen. In fact his food and dress were greatly influenced by European habits and he lacked the moderation people thought necessary in this respect.

The Deputy Inspector-General of Police, an old friend, had sent word that he was coming during the ensuing Christmas for a shikar excursion with his wife and children. So the guest house was ready and tents were pitched in the forest for four days ahead of their arrival. Men were sent to Cuttack to purchase the necessary articles. The servants and officials had not

even a moment's respite, and showers of abuse from everyone poured on the zamindar—behind his back, of course.

He motored some way to receive the distinguished visitors. The sahib arrived in time, the host appearing mightily pleased as he joined his friend and his wife and daughters. The programme was fixed. The visitors spent the night in the guest house and proposed to start for the forest after breakfast the next morning.

The place for shikar was about fourteen miles away from the zamindar's house. There was scarcely any human habitation in the neighbourhood. *Khansamas* and servants had left in advance with articles of food and other things. The guests, the zamindar, the D.I.-G.'s two hunting dogs and the zamindar's pets, Albion and Jolly, went in a motor car after them. It was hardly necessary to take Jolly along, but Albion would be of great help during shikar and Jolly was taken only to keep Albion in good cheer. For he would always seek to run back to her whenever he got an opportunity. As a matter of formality, the little mistress' consent was also obtained for their absence. She had strictly enjoined on her father that her two playmates were not to be detained for more than three days.

However, five days passed quickly amidst the mirth and jollity of a merry Christmas. In that solitary jungle the guests were so well served that the seclusion seemed sweet after the din and bustle of the town. After lunch on the fifth day the zamindar and the D.I.-G. started for the shikar. For the last four days the ladies had been entertained with dances and songs in the evening and were too tired to accompany the men. The servants too were worn out with toil, but two or three of them had to accompany the shikaris.

Having missed once or twice, they frightened all the birds away so that they had to wait for them to return. So the shikaris entered the adjoining forest. They wandered about for some time—but to no purpose. The servants were sent out in quest of prey. None could tell, though, whether or not they sat gossiping or lighted their cheroots or prepared tobacco powder with their thumbs pressed on their palms! The two friends stealthily and cautiously searched thicket after thicket. And all unawares they had come to a distance of some four miles

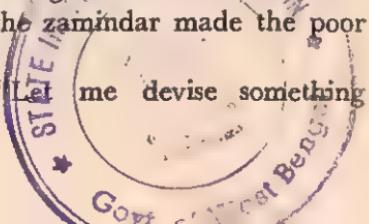
away from the camp.

The day was at its end. The sun had hidden itself behind the nearest hill; its crimson streaks were diffused across the western sky, unnoticed by the shikaris, who were greedily seeking the flesh of some living animal. A huge dark cloud appeared over the eastern horizon. With their eyes fixed on the ground, what concern had they with the sky? The servants saw the impending danger and set out in search of their masters. It would have been hard to find them even in broad daylight in that thick jungle.

The two friends were lost in the darkness. They turned back only when the cool breeze of the approaching rain became too cool to be ignored. The clouds were gathering thicker and darker. It was impossible to cover four miles and reach the tent before the rain set in. Helpless, they started a 'double march' with the rifles on their shoulders, but with none of the happy mood of a shikari chasing a terrified deer. The storm came upon them with all its fury. It was dark all around and the sound of the wind in the jungle was eerie. They traced their way back with much caution and difficulty. Sodden to the marrow bone and panting for breath, they entered the tent at last. It was eight o'clock at night.

There had been no arrangements for dinner, for they had counted on finding game. But unfortunately not a bird had been shot. It had been settled, moreover, that they would leave the place on the morrow. The zamindar's home was about fourteen miles away from the camp. Was it at all possible in this howling storm and rain to get food from such a distance? The motor-track must have become quite inaccessible with rain water. There was no place nearby where suitable food for the sahib and the zamindar could be had. Everybody grew worried as to what to do. Before starting in quest of shikar the zamindar had wanted to make some arrangements about meat for the dinner, but the sahib had dissuaded him and assured him that they would not fail to find game. What was to be done now? For no fault of theirs the zamindar made the poor servants the target of his anger.

Suddenly the sahib beamed. "Let me devise something for dinner," he offered.



"Well?" Muttered the host with a forced smile.

"Would you mind?" asked the sahib. "It'll make a sumptuous feast and you can have the animal replaced easily. Don't you like the idea?"

At first the zamindar did not catch what the sahib had in mind. He shuddered when the sahib finished his speech, and could only mumble in a hurry: "Oh, yes, 'tis a fine idea." He could not disagree with the proposal of his esteemed friend and guest, but at the mention of Jolly's name his heart began to pound violently.

Jolly had a pathetic history, and it was largely because of it that the zamindar was so very attached to her. He had happened to come by her originally while displaying his skill in shooting before an European friend. She was then suckling her mother. The mother fell at the zamindar's shot and the helpless little orphan stood dumbfounded. When the zamindar's man approached her she did not even stir, for she was sure that her mother was at her side. Her innocent look went to the zamindar's heart and he became attached to the creature. Never had he dreamt that a day would come when he would have to slaughter her for his own food. But should such a noble guest be refused?

The sahib rejoiced at his host's approval and was exceedingly glad at the thought of killing the animal himself. He had a reputation for bloodthirstiness which had won him distinction in the last Great War. In the absence of shikar he would kill some of his own fowls to keep his brain cool. Secretly proud of her husband for this trait, the memsahib would say, teasingly, that once he was about to cut his own throat as he could find nothing else to kill!

Albion and Jolly slept snuggled against each other's face. It was not an easy job for a stranger to approach Albion, especially when he was by the side of Jolly. None but Madhiya, the servant, could do that. Madhiya had to fetch Jolly at the instance of his master. Albion woke up and barked at the sound of his footsteps, but Madhiya's voice reassured him. However when Jolly was being dragged away Albion would not keep quiet. He worked himself into a fury and wanted to follow Jolly. At last Madhiya had to yield and lead him along

by the chain.

Incredibly clever though he was, Albion could not guess why Madhiya was forcing Jolly away from him at such an unusual hour. Madhiya himself held Albion and handed over Jolly to the *khansamas*. This excited suspicion in the mind of Albion but he did not budge an inch. The sahib got himself ready to vent his savage instinct. His knife glittered against the lamp light. He loved to cut the animal up alive instead of wasting a bullet.

The *khansamas* had tied Jolly's feet and held her tight so that she might not move to disturb the execution. What fear had Jolly? She stood still. The zamindar, her loving master and guardian and Albion, the friend in need, were by her side. As her feet were tightly tied down she looked at her dear partner and at her ever-trusted master in turn. The zamindar tried to keep himself engaged in gossiping with his friend's wife and daughters. Something in him was still urging him to turn his eyes on Jolly. He occupied himself in laughter and mirth and seemed heedless of Jolly. At the slightest turn of his eyes on her, he feared the animal would expose his innermost secret and accuse him with human speech.

Albion's suspicion was strengthened as he saw the knife in the sahib's hand. The D.I.-G. cleaned the knife and rose from his seat. Unwittingly the zamindar's eye fell on Jolly, and it struck him that she had been praying for mercy. That wistful, pitiable look! Suddenly he got up and went inside the tent on some pretext. But Albion could understand Jolly's entreaties. When she turned her disappointed look from her master to her beloved friend it touched him to the quick. The intention of the sahib, as he advanced, knife in hand, became clear in a flash to Albion. He had seen the slaughter of many a goat and deer on that very spot. And now his dearest one was to meet the same fate! He gave a strong tug at the chain and in the twinkling of an eye freed himself from the hold of Madhiya and attacked one of the *khansamas*. The sahib and the servants ran helter-skelter towards the tent. The zamindar was sitting absent-mindedly inside the tent. He hastened to make his excuse to his guests, and flew into a rage at Madhiya. But his words were clearly more expressive of the anguish of his heart

than of his anger.

Madhiya who was hurt by Albion fastened him tight to a tree. Again the D.I.-G. came smiling, knife in hand. Mockingly he held the knife at poor Albion and then advanced towards Jolly. Again the zamindar stole a glance at Jolly and found her praying for help with the same entreating eyes. He got up and was about to say something to his host, when he restrained himself. "Alas!" he said to himself, "am I mad?" He took his seat again and thought of running away from the scene. But lest the sahib should take it amiss, he gave up the idea and quietly sat as before. To avoid the sight he hid his face with a kerchief Albion's heart-rending cry assailed his ears. Through this cry the doleful moaning of a choking voice was heard. It penetrated his heart. It was Jolly's voice! He took the kerchief off his face and found that all was over.

At the dinner table his soul cried out to him not to partake of Jolly's flesh. It was with an inward struggle that he could join in the conviviality and with great difficulty he swallowed a bit. Absorbed in thoughts he stepped into the bedroom, but he could not sleep. He saw himself wandering from one jungle to another — a storm and darkness coming on — that memorable noon — the mother falling down with the bullet wound and the innocent young one standing stock-still, not the least bit afraid. Then again that pitch darkness — the friends starting towards the camp with rifles on their shoulders — the devilish laughter of the sahib, knife in hand, and Jolly's prayer for life!

They returned home at daybreak. His guests, happy with the entertainment, took their leave the same day. Madhiya came breathless, dragging Albion all the way, to report to the master that the dog had struggled hard not to leave the spot. The master was sitting alone in a pensive mood. Without another word Madhiya left quietly. The zamindar was undergoing feelings of deep penitence. Up till now he had contained himself by an act of will, or otherwise he would have behaved as a madman. Someone was, as it were, urging him from within to fall flat at the feet of this common cur and ask for his pardon. He felt himself meaner than Albion. "Alas! Is my heart so murderous and vile! Am I more heinous, more abominable than this carnivorous thing! Fie—fie on me! Is the strong

meant to keep the weak in bondage and to destroy it for his own existence? Must one be killed because another is to live?"

A voice called aloud from behind, "Where's Jolly?" He turned round to see his four-year-old daughter. He could not find an adequate reply to her query, he got up in haste and pressed the child to his bosom, imploring her, "She is there, my darling, she is!" But the child would not listen. She pulled a long face and said, puckering her lips, "You lie! Madhiya says the sahib has killed her. I shall kill the sahib."

The father could not suppress his emotion at the anger and sorrow of his little child and the tears ran down his cheeks. Throwing himself upon the bed he began to weep bitterly. But the query "Where's Jolly?" arose in his mind times without number. He put the same question to himself and looked at his own person. The painful moan of each piece of Jolly's flesh he had swallowed was shooting through all the pores of his skin. He fell seriously ill. He was laid up with fever for two weeks, and his condition grew critical. But he recovered—it was, rather, a resurrection!

The guest house built for Europeans was turned into a shelter for the sick and the destitute. Animal food was strictly forbidden in the zamindar's house and orders were passed prohibiting hunting or killing of deer within the borders of his estate.

Albion would not touch anything. He fasted the whole day and when the zamindar fell ill he managed to get away. Madhiya went in search of him and found him nosing the spot where Jolly had been done to death. It was there that he had lost his dearest companion. He was brought back but all care taken of him proved of no avail. Once again he spirited himself away and was not to be found anywhere.

Some say that he went in the direction where the tent had been pitched; but the woodcutters say that they hear the wail of an animal while felling trees in the forest. But whose may that voice be? Jolly's or Albion's?

KARTAR SINGH DUGGAL

Miracle

"AND THEN THE GURU went into the wilderness. It was very hot. The scorching sun beat relentlessly on rock and sand; the scrub and trees were withered and burnt. And it was absolutely still. Not a man for miles around. Not a trace of life."

"And what happened then, mother?" I asked anxiously.

"The Guru walked on. He was lost in his thoughts. His disciple got very thirsty and begged for water. Water in that place! The Guru said: 'Man, have patience. Thou canst drink to thy heart's content when we get to the next village'. But the disciple was extremely thirsty and would not listen, so that the Guru became very anxious. There was no water in that waste land and he knew that when the disciple became difficult, he made things difficult for everyone else. The Guru explained once more: 'There is no water anywhere. Resign thyself to thy fate and be patient.' But the disciple sat down and refused to move another step. The Guru was amused at the disciple's stubbornness and closed his eyes to meditate. When he opened his eyes he saw the disciple writhing like a fish out of water. So the Guru smiled and said: 'Brother, on the top of this hill there is a hut in which dwelleth a Dervish. Go thou to him, and ask for water. In these parts only his well hath any water.' "

"And then, Mummy?" I asked very excited now to know whether or not the disciple got the water.

"The disciple was so thirsty that as soon as he heard of water he ran up the hill. The hot afternoon, the thirst and then the uphill journey! He found the hut with great difficulty, and when he got there he was out of breath and drenched in sweat. He salaamed the Dervish and begged for water. The Dervish pointed to the well. As the disciple moved to the well, a thought came into the Dervish's mind and he asked: 'Good man! Whence hast thou come?' The disciple replied: 'I am a companion of the

Great Guru. We have walked into this wilderness and I grew very thirsty but there was no water down below.' When the Dervish heard of the Guru he was full of wrath and turned the disciple out of his hut. So he came down again to the Guru quite tired out and told him of what had passed. The Guru listened and smiled. 'Go back,' he advised, 'this time with humility in thine heart. Tell him that thou art the companion of another Dervish.' The disciple retraced his steps cursing and muttering to himself, but the Dervish refused to budge. 'I will not give a drop of water to the companion of an unbeliever,' he said and turned the disciple away. Now the disciple was in a very bad state. His lips were parched and cracked. He felt that he was going to die. The Guru heard the whole story. 'Praised be the Almighty, the Formless One,' exclaimed the Guru and asked the disciple to go to the Dervish yet another time. The disciple did as he was commanded and for the third time climbed the rocky hill. He fell at the feet of the Dervish and asked for just a few drops to slake his thirst, but the holy man was consumed with the fire of hate and harshly refused the disciple's request. 'If thy Guru styles himself a holy man,' he taunted, 'cannot he give his disciple a palmful of water?' The disciple came back and collapsed at the Guru's feet. The Guru patted him on the back and asked him to be of good cheer. When the disciple recovered, the Guru asked him to pick up a big stone which lay in front of them. The disciple did as he was told. And all at once water spouted out of the ground, so that within a few minutes there was water all around them. Meanwhile the Dervish who had need of water went to his well and found it absolutely dry. He looked down and saw a flowing stream. He also saw the Guru and his disciple sitting beneath an acacia tree. In great anger the Dervish put his weight against a huge boulder and rolled it down the hill. The disciple saw the enormous boulder coming down and shrieked with terror, but the Guru remained calm and merely exhorted him to praise the Almighty, the Formless one. When the boulder came upon him, he calmly put out his hand and stopped it with his palm. And to this day the rock bears the imprint of the hand of the Guru. Now at the site stands a temple known as the Temple of the Guru's Palm and a whole town has grown up about it. There is

also a railway station called the 'Holy Palm.' ”

I was thoroughly enjoying the tale. But when it came to the Guru holding back the boulder with his hand, it gave me a peculiar feeling. It was not possible; how could a man hold back a boulder the size of a hill? And how could the rock have received the imprint of his palm? I did not believe a word of it. “Someone must have carved it later on,” said I, and I argued with my mother for a long time. I was willing to believe that there was a spring beneath a stone; there were many scientific ways of locating underground seams of water. But for a human being to stop a mountain landslide, that I refused to believe.

My mother looked at me and fell silent.

“Can anyone stop an avalanche?” I would say with a snigger whenever I recalled the legend. Many times was the tale told in our village temple, but the business of holding back the boulder was too much for me to stomach; when they told us the same story at school, I protested and began to argue with the teacher.

“Nothing is impossible for men of faith,” replied my teacher and silenced me. I remained quiet but did not believe a word of what he had said. I wanted to yell at the top of my voice: “How can anyone stop a big boulder rolling down a hill with the palm of his hand?”

Not long afterwards I heard that an ‘incident’ had taken place at the Temple of the Guru’s Palm. Those days there were many ‘incidents’ taking place. And whenever there was an ‘incident’ no fires were lit in our home and we slept on the floor as during days of mourning. What the ‘incident’ was, I did not know.

Our village was not far from the Temple of the Guru’s Palm. As soon as the news came, my mother left the house. I went with her, and with me, my little sister. All the way my mother’s eyes were moist with tears. I wondered what the word ‘incident’ meant.

When we reached the Temple we heard a strange tale.

Far away in a distant city the white man had opened fire on an unarmed crowd of Indians and killed many of them. Amongst the dead were young men, old men, women and children. Those that remained had been bundled into a train and

were being sent to a prison in another city. The prisoners were hungry and thirsty, but the order was that the train was to run through without stopping anywhere. When the news came to the Temple, every one who had heard this was aflame with anger. How could a trainload of thirsty people pass by the Temple where the Guru had performed a miracle to quench the thirst of one disciple! The train carried not only thirsty, but also hungry and wounded men and women. The inhabitants of the Holy Palm asked for the train to be stopped at their railway station. A written request was addressed to the Station Master. Long distance telephone calls were made and many telegrams sent. But the white man had ordained that the train was not to stop and he refused to change his orders. The people of Holy Palm decided otherwise. They piled the platform high with loaves of bread, curried lentils, sweet rice pudding and canisters of water.

The trains were known to come like the sudden storms of summer and vanish with the speed of hurricanes. How could anyone stop a train!

My mother's friend told us the rest.

"The first one on the rail-track was the father of my children. Then his friends lay alongside him and alongside them we their wives. The engine started whistling frantically from a long distance. It began to slow down. But all said and done it was made of steel and had to take its time to come to a standstill. The wheels of the locomotive ran over many men. But no one moved from his place. All along the track we chanted: "Praise be to the Almighty, the Formless One—praise be . . . the Formless One." And the train stopped. "Praise be to the Almighty, the Formless One," the chant went on in unison. And then the train went backwards. This time the men under it were cut up again. Streams of blood flowed on either side of the rail-track right up to the brick-built culvert near the bridge."

I heard the story and was amazed. The whole day I did not utter a word.

When we were returning to our village that evening my mother began to tell my sister the story of the Temple of the Palm. She told her how the Guru came that way with his disciple; how the disciple thirsted for water; how the Guru sent

him to the Dervish on top of the hill; how the Dervish turned him back three times; how the Guru asked his disciple to pick up a rock; how the spring burst forth from under it and the well of the Dervish dried up; how the Dervish had hurled the boulder; and how the Guru had said: "Praise be to the Almighty, the Formless One," and stopped it with the palm of his hand.

"But how can any one hold back a big boulder?" interrupted my little sister.

"And why not," I burst in., "If the train which comes like a storm can be held, why not a boulder down a mountain?"

And then tears came rolling down my mother's cheeks.

*Translated from the original Punjabi
by KHUSHWANT SINGH.*

Brother Abdul Rahman

SOME THOUGHT HIM DAFT, others considered him a dervish, a wandering fakir, God-intoxicated. He may have been both. In appearance he was lean, rather tall, and wheat-complexioned. His body was not altogether bare, and he went about loosely wrapped in an old quilt. He seemed always in a state of spiritual animation. He visited all manner of places of worship, no matter what their religious denomination, mosque and shrine alike were houses of God, and he was seen frequenting both. On the wharf at Sukker in Sind, facing the railway goods-office, folk would often gather near the booths and recite shlokas, verses from the Hindu religious poet Sami. Brother Abdul Rahman would also join the gathering and sit and listen with pleasure. Now and again he would mutter to himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, are you following it? When will you begin to see light?"

One day he tripped over a stone. He said to himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, how proud and arrogant you are! Walking with a cocked head! If you looked down you would not stumble." He had not gone a few steps when he pulled himself up and started upbraiding himself, "Brother Abdul Rahman, how selfish you are! Was it right to have left that stone where it was? Suppose another wayfarer tripped over it?" After a pause he said solemnly, "Brother Abdul Rahman, if you are a good fellow you will pick up that stone and throw it aside." And he went back and flung it out of the way.

He was in the habit of talking to himself, as a philosopher to a friend, as one person to another, in constant exhortation — his form of address invariably being 'Brother Abdul Rahman.' If somebody said to him, "Brother Abdul Rahman, are you hungry? Would you like to eat?" he would turn to himself and ask, "Brother Abdul Rahman, he wants to know if you are

hungry and would like to eat." And he would answer, after considering a little, by quoting a Persian proverb: "One must eat to live, not live to eat." In this manner he would confer with himself before answering. He wrote Persian poetry, knew Hafiz by heart and a good portion of the Sindhi poets, Shah Abdul Latif and Sami. Of Saint Sachal, the third premier poet of Sind, he was a veritable disciple. He knew Urdu also. When there were letters in Urdu, from Punjab, Abdul Rahman had to be sought out to read and interpret them. He was of a quiet and gentle disposition. He coveted nothing, had few wants, and ate sparingly. His *godri*, the old quilt, was always wrapped round him, whatever the season. At night it served as covering. However oppressive the weather, he had his *godri* about him and defied the heat, though other men nearly died of it. Who knows what secret converse he held with the Divine Beloved under cover of his *godri*!

One day an innocent man found himself involved in a criminal prosecution. He was accused of having stolen a gold watch belonging to a Muslim seth, a rich merchant. The police had searched him and found it on his person in front of witnesses; the evidence against him was strong and it seemed unlikely that the man would be acquitted. The Seth was a man of influence. The accused stated that it was a trumped-up charge. He had one day passed by the Seth's house and the Seth had somehow got it into his head that the accused had made lewd signs to his womenfolk. As a consequence the poor fellow was beaten mercilessly by the Seth, and but for Abdul Rahman, who happened then to appear on the scene, the man might have been beaten to death. Even after Abdul Rahman's intercession the Seth would not be appeased. He said that the fellow had 'cast an evil eye on his honour,' and it was intolerable that he should continue to live thereafter. The Seth was a man of honour. And honour was dearer....

Abdul Rahman began to hold a conference with himself. "Brother Abdul Rahman," he said, "the Seth will not desist. His honour is very dear to him. He has a sister, thirty-five

years of age, and yet he will not find her a husband, because she will then demand a share of the patrimony. A woman must either have a husband or...." The philosopher curbed himself. "No, Brother Abdul Rahman," he said, "do not lift the veil from other men's affairs. Better expostulate with the Seth again. If he refuses to see reason, you may speak the whole truth." Now, Abdul Rahman never discoursed to himself *sotto voce*. His words on this occasion had thrown enough light on the situation and everyone present, including the Seth, had heard him. Thus was the poor man saved. But there was a buzz of gossip about the baseness of the Seth and he lost his reputation. Hence the prosecution, a made-up affair.

The Seth denied everything. He had bought off three of the four defence witnesses, who either did not appear in court or pretended ignorance. There remained only Abdul Rahman. The Counsel for defence seriously doubted the sagacity of putting such a man in the witness-box. But the accused had implicit faith in Abdul Rahman. Being a God-fearing man he could be relied upon to tell the truth.

When Abdul Rahman received a summons he said, "Brother Abdul Rahman, you have been summoned to appear in a court of justice. Such a place is worthy of respect." That meant that he must not go there unshod. He managed to get hold of a pair of shoes for the occasion, not to look respectable, but to show deference to a place so 'worthy of respect.' At every hearing he went to the court in his *godri*, carrying his shoes in his hand according to the custom of Sindhi villagers. When he was called for evidence he put them on with ceremony. The *godri* was folded lengthwise and worn like a scarf round his neck. He had hardly stepped in when the liveried peon of the court asked him to leave his shoes outside, as others did, who did not count in the social hierarchy.

"Brother Abdul Rahman," said Abdul Rahman to himself, "the court peon is asking you to enter bare-footed, and so appear respectful. Tell him you procured the shoes for that very purpose." He did as he was bidden by his inner self and walk-

ed in with his shoes on. When the Magistrate saw him, he laughed. As he took his stand in the witness-box the Magistrate asked him why he was wearing the *godri* round his neck. Abdul Rahman looked inwards and communicated the magistrate's question to himself in his usual fashion. "Brother Abdul Rahman," said the monitor, "you are in court now, therefore answer with due care. Tell the magistrate sahib that it is a custom with the Hindus on important occasions to wear a *dupatta* or scarf round the neck, and that you have done likewise." The instruction was duly communicated to the honourable magistrate by the self-same Abdul Rahman.

The Serishtadar, a subordinate officer, now turned to Abdul Rahman to administer the usual oath: "In the presence of God I swear that I shall speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Abdul Rahman went through the formality with the same scrupulous adherence to his own mode of communication.

"What is your name?"

"Brother Abdul Rahman, the Serishtadar wants to know your name." Then turning to the Court, added, "My name is Abdul Rahman."

There was laughter in court. The magistrate, after enjoying the situation for a while, began to show annoyance. One of the advocates explained to him that the witness was in the habit of speaking thus.

"Your religion?" asked the subordinate officer.

Abdul Rahman half shut his eyes to ponder. He sensed a warning from within. "Brother Abdul Rahman," the monitor said, "you have sworn to speak the truth. The question is awkward. If you say you are a Muslim, the Hindus will take exception; if you answer you are a Hindu, the Muslims will frown. Brother Abdul Rahman, do not feel perplexed. Cut the Gordian knot by reciting from Saint Sachal the verse:

I am neither Hindu
nor Muslim,
I am what I am.

The Serishtadar, did not know if this answer would do for

the record, so he turned to the magistrate for guidance.

"Write him down as a Muslim," the magistrate ordered.

"Your age?"

"Tell him, Brother Abdul Rahman, that since the magistrate took upon himself to answer the previous question on your behalf, this question also might be addressed to the same quarter."

The magistrate was angry.

"You *jat*!" he thundered, "Will you make your statement sensibly and properly? Don't forget you are in a law court."

A smile played on Abdul Rahman's lips. He said, "Brother Abdul Rahman, the magistrate has called you a *jat*. Ask the magistrate sahib what a *jat* is."

Before Abdul Rahman could address the magistrate directly, that honourable gentleman shouted, "A *jat*, you fool, is an illiterate person."

"Did you hear that, Brother Abdul Rahman? The magistrate sahib says a *jat* is a man who is illiterate. By this definition, Brother Abdul Rahman, surely you cannot be said to be a *jat*. You can read and write Sindhi, Persian, Urdu, Sanskrit and Hindi. Five languages. Will you ask the magistrate sahib how many languages he knows?"

Abdul Rahman turned to the magistrate to speak. But that august personage brushed him aside.

"A *jat* is one who does not know English," he said with a note of triumph in his voice, hoping to have crushed this queer customer.

There was whispering here and tittering there in the court. Abdul Rahman's smile broadened visibly. He said to himself in a confidential though audible tone, "Brother Abdul Rahman, the magistrate says a *jat* is one who does not know English. Though he himself knows English, he is the son of Topanmal, keeper of the cattle-pound. Will you ask the magistrate, if his forefathers who knew no English were *jats*, and whether he himself is the son of a...."

"None of your presumption, you insolent rascal," roared the magistrate. "Will you show cause why you should not be charged with contempt of court?"

He was further ordered to cease talking and to submit a

written deposition.

Abdul Rahman stepped out of the witness-box and going towards the table indicated, bent over it and wrote as follows:

"Honourable Magistrate sahib, Brother Abdul Rahman is not guilty of contempt of court. If anyone is guilty of the offence it is you. On this day alone you have abused several witnesses. But your abusive language will not so much as touch the fringe of Brother Abdul Rahman's *godri*. Let me give you a bit of advice. Though you sit in judgment over the people, you are not their lord and master. You are their servant. We witnesses have not attended court of our own accord. We have been summoned to assist you in the administration of justice, and this is the treatment you mete out to us! Who will bother to appear in your court to give evidence if you shower abuse on the witnesses? Will you show cause why you should not be dismissed from service for contempt of court? Brother Abdul Rahman has in accordance with the oath administered to him by the court spoken the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God."

Signed :
Brother Abdul Rahman."

*Translated from the original Sindhi
by T.H. ADVANI.*

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI

The Nose-jewel

TWO SPARROWS BUILT A NEST in a nice spot in the roof of Ramayya's house and the mother-bird laid her eggs in it.

"My dear," began the male sparrow.

"And what do you want now?" asked his wife.

"Why does the lady of this house always quarrel with her husband?"

"How am I to know?" said the female bird. "Let us mind our own business."

"You are always self-centred," said the male sparrow and added, "Should we not help this poor Brahmin Ramayya?"

The female sparrow said with disdain, "Let me see what help you give. Please do not talk about what does not concern us. See that the cat does not come near our nest. That would be enough for you and me."

Somewhere in the muckheap lay a diamond nose-jewel. The male bird picked it up and came to the nest with the shining stud in his beak and said to his wife: "Look! Do you like this?"

The wife-bird replied, "What am I to do with diamond nose-studs or with ear-rings? Find some grubs; the young ones are hungry."

The bird dropped the diamond stud on the floor and went out in search of little worms for the young ones.

Ramayya's wife noticed the jewel as she was sweeping the floor. She picked it up with delight and wore it.

Ramayya questioned her angrily, "How did you get hold of this diamond-stud? Who is the scamp that makes presents to you without my knowledge?"

"Don't talk nonsense. I found it lying here yesterday and

took it. That is all."

"We should go and deliver it to the village Magistrate. If tomorrow the police should come and search our house, who is to stand the disgrace?"

In Minakshi Ammal's house nearby, the talk went thus: "I forgot and left it in the bath-room. Kuppayi, the servant-woman, must have swept it out. She is very careless and ignorant."

The mother, Minakshi Ammal, consoled her little girl saying, "Let us search and find it. Don't tell father yet. He would go into a rage if he knew that you had lost the diamond nose-stud."

"What is the secret you are whispering about?" asked Mr. Ramanatham Pillai.

The loss of the jewel had to be admitted. Soon the whole village knew about it. The maid-servant Kuppayi was suspected by everyone to have stolen it.

The police came and searched her hut, but could find nothing.

Ramayya's heart was in a flutter. Ramayya's wife put the stud away in her box. She soon developed a severe fever and was confined to her bed. No one thought of searching their house.

The he-sparrow said, "Look at the fun, my dear; the lady of this house is scared and is down with fever."

"Nice fun indeed!" said the she-sparrow. "The poor woman is in a panic. The fever may be the end of her."

"And a good thing too," said the cruel male sparrow.

"It is all your doing; you brought and threw it here and tempted her," said the female bird.

The male bird answered gravely, "Did I tell her to steal the thing? This is bound to happen when a woman is obstinate and disobeys her husband."

"I shall never disobey you, my husband," the mother-bird said. "Come, let us go now and bring some worms for the young ones." And the two flew out.

P. PADMARAJU

On the Boat

AFTER SUNDOWN the world was enveloped in a melancholy haze. The boat glided softly on the still river.

The water lapped against the sides of the boat in soft ripples. No life stirred, as far as the eye could see, and the dead world hummed soundlessly. That hum was inaudible but the body felt it and it filled the mind with its reverberations. A feeling of life coming to an end, of peace inexorable and devoid of all hope, crept over one's consciousness. The vague, mysterious figures of distant trees moved along with the boat motionlessly. The trees, which were nearer, moved backwards, like devils with dishevelled hair. The boat did not move. The canal bank moved backwards.

My eyes looked deep into the still waters, penetrating the darkness. The stars relaxed on the bed of water swinging dreamily on the slow ripples, and slept with eyes wide open.

No stir in the air. The rope by which the boatmen pulled the boat sagged and tautened rhythmically and the bells on the guide-stick in the hand of the leader tinkled at each step. At one end of the boat, there was the red glare of a fire in the oven, alternately glowing into a flame and subsiding. With a small bucket, a boy baled out the water percolating into the boat through small leaks. Sacks filled with paddy, jaggery, tamarind and what not were stacked in the boat.

I lay down on the top of the boat staring at the sky. From inside the boat, tobacco smoke, mingled with soft, inaudible voices, spread in all directions. In the small room where the clerk sat, there was a tiny oil lamp, blinking in the darkness. The boat moved on.

A voice hailed us from the distance, "Please bring the boat to this bank — this bank!" As the boat drew near the bank, two figures jumped on the footboard. The boat tilted slightly to

that side.

"Please do not mind us. We'll sit here on the top," said a woman's voice.

The man at the rudder asked her, "Where were you all these days, Rangi? I have not seen you for a long time."

"My man took me to many places—Vijayanagaram, Visakha-patnam and we climbed together the Hill of Appanna."

"Where are you going now?"

"Mandapaka. How are you, brother? Do you still have the same clerk?"

"Yes."

The male figure fell down in a heap and his lighted cheroot slipped from his mouth. The woman put it out.

"Sit down properly," she said.

"Shut up, you bitch. Do you think I am drunk? I'll break your ribs if you disturb me."

He rolled over from one side to the other. The woman covered him with the sheet of cloth which had slipped to one side when he rolled over. She lighted a cheroot herself. When the match caught the flame, I saw her face for a brief moment. The dark face glowed red.

There was a hint of bass in her voice. When she talked, you felt she was artlessly confiding to you her innermost secrets. She was not beautiful; her hair was dishevelled. And yet there was an air of dignity about her. The black blouse she was wearing gave the impression that she was not wearing any. In the darkness her eyes sparkled as if they were very much alive. When she lighted the match, she noticed me lying nearby.

"There is some one sleeping here," she said trying to wake up the man.

"Lie down, you slut. I'll break your neck if you disturb me again."

With an effort he moved away from me.

The clerk stood on the footboard with the oil lamp in his hand. He asked, "Who is that fellow, Rangi?"

"He is my man, Paddalu. Please do not charge us, sir, for the journey."

"Is it Paddalu? Get him out! He is a rogue and a thief. Have you no sense? He's dead drunk and you have brought

him on to this boat!"

"Who says I am drunk?" complained Paddalu.

"You fools. Throw the fellow out. Why did you allow him to step on the boat? He is dead drunk," the clerk shouted to the boatmen.

"I'm not dead drunk. I merely quenched a little of my thirst," protested Paddalu.

"Why don't you keep mum?" admonished the woman.

"Please, sir, I beg of you. May God bless you, sir. We'll get down at Mandapaka," she pleaded.

The man joined in the pleading, "I'm not drunk, sir. Please be kind and allow us to go to Mandapaka."

"If you make any row I'll have you thrown into the canal. Be careful." The clerk went back to his room. Paddalu sat up. He was not really drunk.

"He will have me thrown into the canal — the son of a bitch!" he said in a low voice.

"Keep quiet. If he heard what you said, then we're finished."

"Let him look around the boat tomorrow morning. He puts on airs, the son of a bitch."

"S...s... Some one is sleeping there."

Paddalu lighted a cheroot. He had a very thick moustache. His face was oval. His spine curved like a bow drawn by a string. He was lean and sinewy and there was an air of nonchalance about him.

The boat was gliding along softly again. The boatmen were washing the utensils after food, talking among themselves.

It was not cool, but I covered myself with a sheet. I felt a little afraid to leave my body exposed helplessly to the darkness. The breeze was sharp — the boat glided softly on the water like the touch of a woman. The night was wrapped with tenderness — as in the caress of an unseen woman. I felt lost in that embrace and many memories of my past and of tales tinged with melancholy about woman tending man and bringing him happiness flitted across my consciousness.

At a little distance from me, two cheroots were glowing red in the darkness. It appeared as though life was sitting there heavily, smoking, and thinking about itself.

"Which is the next village on our way?" asked Paddalu.

"Kaldari," said Rangi.

"We have a long distance to go."

"Don't do it today. You ought to be careful. Not today. We will try some other time when it is safer. Will you not listen to me?" pleaded Rangi.

"You are afraid — you slut," said Paddalu. He tickled her side with a dig of his finger.

"Oh!" she said and looked skyward as if she wished the feeling this gave her would last forever.

Gradually I fell asleep. The boat moved downstream as if also in sleep. The two figures not far from me were talking in whispers to each other for some time. Though I was sleeping, a part of me was awake. I knew that the boat was moving, that the water was lapping its sides, that the trees on the banks were moving backwards. Inside the boat every one was asleep. Rangi moved from my side to the rudder and sat beside the man who was handling it.

"How are you, brother?" she asked.

"How are you?" asked the man at the rudder.

"Oh! what wonders we have seen, my man and I! We went to a cinema. We saw a ship. What a ship it was! Brother, it was as big as our village. I do not know where its rudder was." She told him of a hundred things and her voice caressed me in my sleep.

"Oh girl! I am feeling sleepy," said the man at the rudder.

"I'll hold it, you lie down there," said Rangi.

The boat moved on silently — slowly. Without disturbing the silence, Rangi raised her voice into a song:

Where is he! Oh where is he, my man!
 I put the food in the plate and
 Sit there awaiting his return.
 Like a shadow the night deepens,
 But no sleep comes to my eyes—Where is he? my man?
 The cold wind stings me like a scorpion
 And my nerves contract and ache,
 Unless you press me with your warm body
 I may die....Where is he? — my man!

Rangi's voice had music in it. It seemed as though all living creatures heard the song in their sleep. Age-old tales of love reverberated sadly and mysteriously in that song. It spread like a sheet of water and the world was afloat in it like a small boat. Human life, with its love and longing, seemed heavy, inevitable and strange.

A little distance from me, Paddalu sat with his head covered with a sheet. But a gulf seemed to separate him from Rangi.

After some time Paddalu went inside the boat. I shook off sleep and lay looking at the stars. Rangi was singing :

You thought there was a girl in the lane behind the hut
And sneaked there silently.
But who is the girl, my dear man?
Is she not I in my bloom....

Rangi's song travelled through the worlds; then returned and touched me somewhere in my heart. I felt drowsy. In my sleep, the elemental longing of man and woman for one another danced before me like rustic lovers playing hide and seek. A dream world, entirely new to me, spread before me in my sleep. Rangi and Paddalu moved about in a myriad forms. The song slipped away from my consciousness, and the doors of my mind were gradually closed even to dreams.

Some confusion in the boat woke me and I sat up. The boat was tied to a peg on the bank. The boatmen were moving about hurriedly in the boat and on the bank, with lanterns. On the bank two men stood on either side of Rangi holding her by her arms. One of them was the clerk. He had a piece of rope folded in one of his hands. It looked as if Rangi was going to receive a thrashing. I jumped on to the bank and asked them what was wrong.

The clerk's face flushed with anger. He said, "The rogue

has run away with some of our things. This daughter of a bitch must have got the boat to a bank while everybody was asleep. She was holding the rudder, the slut." There was a note of despair and helplessness in his tone.

"What were the goods that were stolen?" I asked.

"Two baskets of jaggery and three bags of tamarind. That was why I said I would not allow them on the boat. I will have to make up the loss." Then he asked Rangi, "Where did he unload the goods?"

"Near Kaldari, my good sir!"

"You liar! All of us were awake at Kaldari."

"Then it must have been at Nidadavolu."

"No, she will never tell us. We will hand her over to the police at Attili. Get on the boat."

"Kind sir, please allow me to go."

"Get on the boat," he ordered pushing her towards the boat. Two boatmen dragged her into the boat.

"Sleepy beggars! Careless idiots! Have you no sense of responsibility? Why should you put the rudder in her hands?" The clerk was very much put out. He went back to his room.

Rangi resumed her former seat. One boatman sat beside her to guard her. The boat moved again. I lighted a cheroot.

"Kind sir, spare me one too," she asked me in a tone which suggested intimacy. I gave her a cheroot and a box of matches. She lighted it.

"Dear brother! What can you gain by handing me over to the Police?"

"The clerk will not let you go," said the boatman.

"Is Paddalu your husband?" I asked her.

"He is my man," she replied.

The boatman said, "He seduced her when she was a young girl. He did not marry her. Now he has another girl. Where is she, Rangi?"

"In Kovvur. Now, she is in her bloom. When she has endured as many blows as I have, she will look worse than me. The dirty bitch!"

"Then why do you have anything to do with him?" I asked.

"He is mine, sir!" she replied, as if that explained everything.

"But he has another woman."

"What can he do without me? It does not matter how many women a man has. I tell you sir, he is a king among men. There is not another like him."

The boatman said, "Sir, you cannot imagine what this fellow really is, without knowing him. She was just bubbling with life and youth when she got entangled with him. One night, he locked her up in her hut and set fire to it. She was almost burnt to death. It was only her good fortune that saved her."

"I felt like strangling him with my bare hands if I could only get at him. A red hot bamboo fell across my back from the roof of the hut." She lifted her blouse a little and even in that darkness I could see a white scar on her back.

"Why are you still with him after all this cruelty?" I asked.

"I cannot help it, sir. When he is with me, I simply cling to him. He can talk so well and your sense of pity wells up like a spring. This evening we started from Kovvur. On the way, he begged me on his knees to help him in this affair. He said he was completely broke. We reached the Nidadavolu channel by a short cut across the fields...."

"Where did he land the goods?"

"How should I know?"

"Oh! she will never tell the truth, the rogue!" said the boatman laughing.

There was a sudden impulse of curiosity in me to have a close look at her face. But in that darkness, she remained hazy and inscrutable.

The boat crawled slowly on the smooth sheet of water. As midnight passed, the breeze developed a colder sting. There was a slight rustle of leaves on the trees. I did not sleep again that night. Rangi's guard tried ineffectually to fight his overpowering desire to sleep and finally yielded to it. But Rangi sat there listlessly smoking her cheroot, reconciled to her position.

"You were not married at all?" I asked her.

"No. I was very young when Paddalu took me away."

"Which is your native village?"

"Indrapalem.... Then I did not know he was a drunkard Now, of course, I have caught it from him. There is nothing wrong if one drinks. But sometimes when he is drunk, he is wild."

"You could have left him and gone back to your parents."

"That is what I feel like, when he becomes wild. But then there is no one else like him. You do not know him. When he is not drunk he is as meek as a lamb. He might take a hundred women. But he comes back to me. What can he do without me?"

The woman's attitude struck me as strange, and I could not divine what held those two together. Rangi said again. "No job suited either of us. So we had to take to thieving. When my mother was alive, she used to scold me for making a fool of myself. One night, he brought that girl to my hut."

"Which girl?"

"The one he is now living with. He put her on my bed and lay down beside her. Before my very eyes! Both of them were drunk. The slut! I pounced upon her and scratched her violently. He intervened and beat me out of my breath. About midnight he went away with her somewhere. He returned again. I called him names and refused to admit him into the house. He collapsed on the doorstep and began to weep like a child. I was touched. I sat beside him. He took me into his lap and asked me to give him my necklace. 'What for?' I asked him. He said it was for the other girl. I was beside myself with anger and heaped on him torrents of abuse. He told me, weeping, that he could not live without that girl. My anger knew no bounds. I pushed him out and bolted the door inside. He pulled at it for a while and went away. I lay with my eyes wide open and could not sleep for a long time. But after I fell asleep, the house caught fire. He had locked the hut on the outside and set fire to it. I tried the door desperately and at that time of the night my shouts for help did not reach my neighbours. My body was being fried alive. I fell unconscious. My neighbours must have rescued me in that state. The police arrested him the next day. But I told them categorically that he could not have been the author of the crime. That evening he came to me and wept for hours. Sometimes, when he is drunk he weeps like that. But when he is not drunk, he is such a jolly fellow. I gave him that necklace."

"Why do you still assist him in these crimes?"

"What am I to do when he comes and begs me as if his whole life depends on it?"

"Did he really take you to all those places, Vijayanagaram, Visakhapatnam and what not?"

"No. I wanted to gain the confidence of the boatmen. On two former occasions, this very boat was robbed."

"What will you do, if the police arrest you?"

"Why should I do anything? What can they do? I have no stolen goods in my possession. Who knows who was responsible for the robbery? They might beat me. But ultimately they will have to set me free."

"Supposing Paddalu is caught with these goods?"

"No, he would have disposed of them by now. I remained in the boat to give him enough time to effect his escape."

She heaved a sigh and then said, *sotto voce*, "All this goes to that damned bitch. He will not leave her till her freshness fades away. I have to suffer all this for the sake of that slut."

There was not a trace of emotion in her voice, nor was there any reproach. She accepted him as he was and was prepared to do anything for him. It was not sacrifice, not devotion, not even love. It was simply the heart of a woman, with a strange complex of feelings, tinged with love as well as with jealousy. There was only one outward expression of this medley of feelings and that was the longing she felt for her man. Every fibre of that heart thirsted for that man. But she had no demands to make of him, ethical or moral. She did not mind if he was not true to her, even if he was cruel to her. She loved him as he was, with all his vagaries and pettinesses and with his wild and untamed spirit. What did she derive from such a life with the dice so loaded against her? What was her compensation? Was not such a life very unhappy and burdensome? But then what was happiness except the lack of a consciousness of unhappiness? Was I happy judging by that standard?

The wind rose gradually. The boat moved faster. There were signs of the world waking up slowly from its rejuvenating slumber. Here and there peasants could be seen going to their fields. The morning star had not yet risen. Rangi drew her knees closer, folded her arms around them and sat looking into the fading night.

"He is my man. Wherever he goes, he is bound to return to me," she said slowly, not particularly addressing me. These

words summarised the one hope, the one strength, the one faith that kept her irrevocably linked with life. Her whole life revolved around that one point. There was pity, fear and above all reverence in my heart for that woman. I wondered, how confusing, grotesque, terrifying, even insane, were the affairs of the human heart!

I sat looking at her till the day broke. Before I got off the boat, I put a rupee in her hand without being observed, and then went away without waiting to see her reaction. I never met her again.

Translated from the original Telugu by the author.

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

Tiny's Granny

GOD KNOWS what her real name was. No one had ever called her by it. When she was a little snotty-nosed girl roaming about the alleys people used to call her 'Bafatan's kid.' Then she was 'Bashira's daughter-in-law', and then 'Bismillah's mother'; and when Bismillah died in child-birth, leaving Tiny an orphan, she became 'Tiny's granny' — and she remained 'Tiny's granny' to her dying day.

There was no occupation which Tiny's granny had not tried at some stage of her life. From the time she was old enough to hold her own cup she had started working at odd jobs in people's houses in return for her two meals a day and cast-off clothes. Exactly what the words 'odd jobs' mean, only those know who have been kept at them at an age when they ought to have been laughing and playing with other children. Anything from the uninteresting duty of shaking the baby's rattle to massaging the master's head comes under the category of 'odd jobs.' As she grew older she learned to do a bit of cooking, and she spent some years of her life as a cook. But when her sight began to fail and she began to cook lizards in the lentils and knead flies into the bread, she had to retire. All she was fit for after that was gossiping and tale-bearing. But that also is a fairly paying trade. In every *muhalla*¹ there is always some quarrel going on, and one who has the wit to carry information to the enemy camp can be sure of a hospitable reception. But it's a game that doesn't last. People began to call her a tell-tale, and when she saw that there was no future there, she took up her last and most profitable profession: she became a polished and accomplished beggar.

At meal-times Granny would dilate her nostrils to smell

¹A ward or quarter of a city.

what was cooking, single out the smell she liked best and be off on its track until she reached the house it was coming from.

"Lady, are you cooking *aravi*¹ with the meat?" she would ask with a disinterested air.

"No, granny. The *aravi* you get these days doesn't cook soft. I'm cooking potatoes with it."

"Potatoes! What a lovely smell! Bismillah's father, God rest him, used to love meat and potatoes. Every day it was the same thing: 'Let's have meat and potatoes,' and now" (she would heave a sigh) "I don't see meat and potatoes for months together." Then, suddenly getting anxious, "Lady, have you put any coriander-leaf in with the meat?"

"No, granny. All our coriander was ruined. The confounded water-carrier's dog got into the garden and rolled all over it."

"That's a pity. A bit of coriander-leaf in with the meat and potatoes makes all the difference. Hakimji's² got any amount in his garden."

"That, no good to me, granny. Yesterday his boy cut Shabban Mian's³ kite-string and I told him that if he showed his face again he'd better look out for himself."

"Good heavens, I shan't say it's for you." And Granny would gather her *burqa*⁴ around her and be off with slippers clacking to Hakimji's. She'd get into the garden on the plea of wanting to sit in the sun, and then edge towards the coriander bed. Then she'd pluck a leaf and crush it between her finger and thumb and savour the pleasant smell and as soon as the Hakimji's daughter-in-law turned her back, Granny would make a grab. And obviously, when she had provided the coriander-leaf she could hardly be refused a bite to eat.

Granny was famed throughout the *muhalla* for her sleight of hand. You couldn't leave food and drink lying unwatched

¹A root vegetable.

²Hakim—one who practises the traditional Arab (originally Greek) system of medicine. Ji is a suffix indicative of respect.

³Shabban Mian is the son of the lady speaking.

⁴A loose, flowing garment worn by Muslim women who observe purdah, completely enveloping them from head to foot. The eyes are covered either by a cloth mesh or by material thin enough to be seen through from the inside. Some have a veil which may be thrown back over the head when not in use.

when Granny was about. She would pick up the children's milk and drink it straight from the pan: two swallows, and it would be gone. She'd put a little sugar in the palm of her hand and toss it straight into her mouth. Or press a lump of *gur*¹ to her palate, and sit in the sun sucking it at her ease. She made good use of her waist-band too. She would whip up an areca-nut and tuck it in. Or stuff in a couple of *chapatis*², half in and half out, but with her thick *kurta*³ concealing them from view, and hobble away, groaning and grunting in her usual style. Everyone knew all about these things, but no one had the courage to say anything, firstly because her old hands were as quick as lightning, and moreover when in a tight corner she had no objection to swallowing whole whatever was in her mouth; and secondly, because if anyone expressed the slightest suspicion of her she made such a fuss that they soon thought better of it. She would swear her innocence by all that was sacred, and threaten to take an oath on the Holy Quran. And who would disgrace himself in the next world by directly inviting her to swear a false oath on the Quran?

Granny was not only a tale-bearer, thief, and cheat. She was also a first-rate liar. And her biggest lie was her *burqa* which she always wore. At one time it had had a veil, but when one by one the old men of the *muhalla* died off, or their eyesight failed, Granny said goodbye to her veil. But you never saw her without the cap of her *burqa*, with its fashionably serrated pattern on her head, as though it were stuck to her skull, and though she might leave it open down the front (even when she was wearing a transparent *kurta* with no vest underneath) it would billow out behind her like a king's robe. This *burqa* was not simply for keeping her head modestly covered. She put it to every possible and impossible use. It served her as bed-clothes: bundled up it became a pillow. On the rare occasions when she bathed, she used it as a towel. At the five times of prayer, it was her prayer-mat. When the local dogs bared their teeth at her it became a serviceable shield for her protection. As the dog leapt at her calves it would find the voluminous folds

¹Brown, unrefined sugar, usually in cake form.

²Round, flat cakes of unleavened bread.

³A shirt-like garment worn outside the trousers.

of Granny's *burqa* hissing in its face. Granny was exceedingly fond of her *burqa*, and in her spare moments would sit and lament with the keenest regret over its advancing old age. To forestall further wear and tear, she would patch it with any scrap of cloth that came her way, and she trembled at the very thought of the day when it would be no more. Where would she get eight yards of white cloth to make another one? She would be lucky if she could get as much together for her shroud.

Granny had no permanent headquarters. Like a soldier, she was always on the march—today in someone's verandah, tomorrow in someone else's back-yard. Wherever she spied a suitable site she would pitch camp, and when they turned her out, would move on. With half her *burqa* laid out under her, and the other half wrapped over her, she would lie down and take her ease.

But even more than she worried about her *burqa*, she worried about her only grand-daughter Tiny. Like a broody old hen, she always had her safe under her sheltering wing, and never let her out of her sight. But a time came when Granny could no longer get about, and when the people of the *muhalla* had got wise to her ways—as soon as they heard the shuffle of her slippers approaching they sounded the alert and took up positions of defence; and then all Granny's broad hints and suggestions would fall on deaf ears. So there was nothing that Granny could do except put Tiny to her ancestral trade, doing odd jobs in people's houses. She thought about it for a long time, and then got her a job at the Deputy Sahib's for her food, clothing, and one and a half rupees¹ a month. She was never far away though, and stuck to Tiny like a shadow. The moment Tiny was out of sight she would set up a hullabaloo.

But a pair of old hands cannot wipe out what is inscribed in a person's fate. It was midday. The Deputy's wife had gone off to her brother's to discuss the possibility of marrying her son to his daughter. Granny was sitting at the edge of the garden taking a nap under the shade of a tree. The lord and master was taking his siesta in a room enclosed by water-cooled screens. And Tiny, who was supposed to be pulling the rope of the

¹At that time, about two shillings.

ceiling fan, was dozing with the rope in her hand. The fan stopped moving, the lord and master woke up, his animality was aroused, and Tiny's fate was sealed.

They say that to ward off the failing powers of old age the *hakims* and *vaidis*¹, besides all the medicines and ointments which they employ, also prescribe children broth — well, the nine-year-old Tiny was no more than a chicken herself.

When Tiny's Granny awoke from her nap, Tiny had disappeared. She searched the whole *muhalla*, but there was no sign of her anywhere. But when she returned tired out to her room at night, there was Tiny in a corner leaning up against the wall, staring about her with listless eyes like a wounded bird. Granny was almost too terrified to speak, but to conceal the weakness she felt she began swearing at Tiny. "You little whore, so this is where you've got to! And I've been all over the place looking for you until my poor old legs are all swollen. Just you wait till I tell the Master! I'll get you thrashed within an inch of your life!"

But Tiny couldn't conceal what had happened to her for long, and when Granny found out, she beat her head and shrieked. When the woman next door was told, she clutched her head in horror. If the Deputy's son had done it, then perhaps something might have been said. But the Deputy himselfone of the leading men in the *muhalla*, grandfather to three grandchildren, a religious man who regularly said his five daily prayers and had only recently provided mats and water-vessels to the local mosque — how could anyone raise a voice against him?

So Granny, who was used to being at the mercy of others, swallowed her sorrow, applied warm cloths to Tiny's back, gave her sweets to comfort her, and bore her trouble as best she might. Tiny spent a day or two in bed, and then was up and about again. And in a few days she had forgotten all about it.

Not so the gentlewomen of the *muhalla*. They would send for her on the quiet and ask her all about it.

"No....Granny will smack me." Tiny would try to get out of it.

¹ Those who practise the ancient traditional system of Indian medicine.

"Here, take these bangles....Granny won't know anything about it." The eager ladies would coax her.

"What happened? How did it happen?" They would ask for all the details, and Tiny, who was too young and innocent to understand entirely what it all meant, would tell them as well as she could, and they would cover their faces and laugh delightedly.

Tiny might forget, but Nature cannot. If you pluck a flower in the bud and make it bloom before it is ready, its petals fall and only the stump is left. Who knows how many innocent petals Tiny's face had shed? It acquired a forward, brazen look, a look older than its years. Tiny did not grow from a child into a girl, but at one leap became a woman, and not a fully-fashioned woman moulded by Nature's skilled and practised hand, but one like a figure on whom some giant with feet two yards long had trodden — squat, fat, puffy, like a clay toy which the potter had knelt on before it had hardened.

When a rag is all dirty and greasy, no one minds too much if someone wipes his nose on it. The boys would pinch her playfully in the open street, and give her sweets to eat. Tiny's eyes began to dance with an evil light.... And now Granny no longer stuffed her with sweets: she beat her black and blue instead. But you can't shake the dust off a greasy cloth. Tiny was like a rubber ball: hit it and it bounces back at you.

Within a few years Tiny's promiscuity had made her a pest to the whole *muhalla*. It was rumoured that the Deputy Saheb and his son had quarrelled over her then that Rajva the palanquin-bearer had given the Mullah a thorough thrashing.... then that she had taken up regularly with the nephew of Siddiq the wrestler. Every day Tiny came near to losing her nose¹, and there was fighting and brawling in the alleys.

The place became too hot to hold her. There was nowhere where she could safely set foot any more. Thanks to Tiny's youthful charms and Siddiq's nephew's youthful strength life in the *muhalla* became intolerable. They say that in places like Delhi and Bombay there is an abundant demand for their kind

¹ Cutting off the nose was the traditional punishment inflicted on a loose woman. In this context, it would be the act of a jealous lover, punishing her for her promiscuity.

of commodity. Perhaps the two of them migrated there.

The day Tiny ran away, Granny had not the slightest suspicion of what was afoot. For several days the little wretch had been unusually quiet. She hadn't even sworn at Granny, but had spent a lot of time sitting quietly on her own, staring into space.

"Come and get your dinner, Tiny," Granny would say.

"I'm not hungry, Granny."

"Tiny, it's getting late. Go to bed."

"I don't feel sleepy, Granny."

That night she began to massage Granny's feet for her. "Granny... Granny; just hear me recite the *subhanakalla-humma*¹ and see if I've got it right." Granny heard it; Tiny had it off pat.

"All right, dear. Off you go now. It's time you were asleep." And Granny turned over and tried to sleep.

A little later she could hear Tiny moving about in the yard. "What the devil is she up to now?" She muttered. "What b— has she brought home now? Little whore! She's got to use even the back-yard now!" But when she peered down into the yard, Granny was filled with awe. Tiny was saying her *isha* prayer.² And in the morning she was gone.

People who return to our place from journeyings far afield sometimes bring news of her. One says that a great lord has made her his mistress and that she is living in fine style like a lady, with a carriage and any amount of gold. Another says he has seen her in the Diamond Market.³ Others say she has been seen in Faras Road³ or in Sona Gachi.³

But Granny's story is that Tiny had had a sudden attack of cholera and was dead before anyone knew it.

After her period of mourning for Tiny, Granny's mind started to wander. People passing her in the street would tease her and make jokes at her expense.

"Granny, why don't you get married?" my sister would say.

Granny would get annoyed. "Who to! Your husband?"

"Why not marry the Mullah? I tell you he's crazy about

¹Part of the words recited at each of the five times of prayer.

²The last of the five daily prayers.

³The names of prostitutes' quarters in various big Indian cities.

you. By God he is!"

Then the swearing would begin, and Granny's swearing was so novel and colourful that people could only stare agast.

"*That pimp!* — Just see what happens if I get hold of him! If I don't pull his beard out, you can call me what you like." But whenever she met the Mullah at the corner of the street, then, believe it or not, she would go all shy.

Apart from the urchins of the *muhalla*, Granny's life-long enemies were the monkeys—"the confounded, blasted monkeys." They had been settled in the *muhalla* for generations and knew all about everyone who lived there. They knew that men were dangerous, and children mischievous, but that women were only afraid of them. But then Granny too had spent all her life among them. She'd got hold of some child's catapult to frighten them with, and when she wound her *burga* round her head like a great turban and pounced upon them with her catapult at the ready, the monkeys really did panic for a moment before returning to their usual attitude of indifference towards her.

Day in and day out Granny and the monkeys used to fight over her bits and pieces of stale food. Whenever there was a marriage in the *muhalla*, or a funeral feast, or the celebrations that mark the fortieth day after child birth, Granny would be there, gathering up the scraps left over as though she were under contract to do so. Where free food was being distributed she would contrive to come up for her share four times over. In this way she would pile up a regular stock of food, and then she would gaze at it regretfully, wishing that God had arranged her stomach like the camel's so that she could tuck away four days' supply at one go. God had ordained that her food supply should be utterly haphazard. So why had He provided her with a machine for eating it so defective that if she had more than two meals' supply at any one time, it simply couldn't cope with it? So what she used to do was to spread out the food to dry on bits of sacking and then put them in a pitcher. When she felt hungry she would take some out and crumble it up, add a dash of water and a pinch of chillies and salt, and there was a tasty mash all ready to eat. But during the summer and during the rains this recipe had often given her severe diarrhoea. So when her bits of food got stale and began to smell she would,

with the greatest reluctance, sell them to people for whatever price she could get to feed to their dogs and goats. The trouble was that generally the stomachs of the dogs and goats proved less brazen than Granny's, and people would not take her dainties as a gift, let alone buy them. All this notwithstanding that these bits and pieces were dearer to Granny than life itself, that she put up with countless kicks and curses to get them, and that to dry them in the sun meant waging holy war against the whole monkey race. She would no sooner spread them out than the news would, as though by wireless, reach the monkey tribes, and band upon band of them would come and take up their positions on the wall or frisk about on the tiles raising a din. They would pull out the straws from the thatch and chatter and scold the passers-by. Granny would take the field against them. Swathing her *burqa* round her head and taking her catapult in her hand, she would take her stand. The battle would rage all day, Granny scaring the monkeys off again and again, and when evening came she would gather up what was left after their depredations, and cursing them from the bottom of her heart, creep exhausted into her little room to sleep.

The monkeys must have acquired a personal grudge against Granny. How else can you explain the fact that they turned their backs on everything else the world had to offer and concentrated all their attacks on Granny's scraps of food? And how else can you explain the fact that a big, rascally, red-behindied monkey ran off with her pillow, which she loved more than her life? Once Tiny had gone, this pillow was the only thing left in the world that was near and dear to her. She fussed and worried over it as much as she did over her *burqa*. She was for ever repairing its seams with stout stitches. Time and again she would sit herself down in some secluded corner and start playing with her pillow like a little girl playing with a doll. She had none but the pillow now to tell all her troubles to and so lighten her burden. And the greater the love she felt for her pillow, the more the stout stitches she would put into it to strengthen its seams.

And now see what a trick Fate played on her. She was sitting leaning against the parapet with her *burqa* wrapped round her, picking the lice out of her waist-band, when suddenly

a monkey flopped down, whipped up her pillow, and was off. You would have thought that some one had plucked Granny's heart out of her breast. She wept and screamed and carried on so much that the whole *muhalla* came flocking.

You know what monkeys are like. They wait until no one is looking and then run off with a glass or a *katora*¹, go and sit on the parapet, and taking it in both hands, start rubbing it against the wall. The person it belongs to stands there looking up and making coaxing noises, and holding out bread, or an onion; but the monkey takes his time, and when he has had his bellyful of fun, throws the thing down and goes his own way. Granny poured out the whole contents of a pitcher, but the b—monkey had set his heart on the pillow, and that was that. She did all she could to coax him, but his heart would not melt, and he proceeded with the greatest enjoyment to peel the manifold coverings off the pillow as though he were peeling the successive skins off an onion — those same coverings over which Granny had pored with her weak and watering eyes, trying to hold them together with stitching. As every fresh cover came off Granny's hysterical wailing grew louder. And now the last covering was off, and the monkey began bit by bit to throw down the contents . . . not cotton wadding but . . . Shabban's quilted jacket . . . Bannu the water-carrier's waist-cloth . . . Hasina's bodice . . . the baggy-trousers belonging to little Munni's doll . . . Rahmat's little *dupatta*² . . . and Khairati's knickers . . . Khairan's little boy's toy pistol . . . Munshiji's muffler . . . the sleeve (with cuff) of Ibrahim's shirt . . . a piece of Siddiq's loin-cloth . . . Amina's collyrium-bottle and Batafan's *kajal-box*³ . . . Sakina's box of tinsel clippings . . . the big bead from the Mullah's rosary and Baqir Mian's prayer-board . . . Bismillah's dried naval-string, and the knob of turmeric in its satchet from Tiny's first birthday . . . some lucky grass, and a silver ring . . . and Bashir Khan's gilt medal conferred on him by the government for having returned safe and sound from the war.

But it was not these trinkets that interested the onlookers.

¹A metal drinking-bowl.

²A piece of muslin or other fine material worn by women across the bosom, with the ends thrown back over the shoulders.

³Lamp-black, used as a cosmetic.

What they had their eyes on was the precious stock of stolen property which Granny had got together by years of raiding.

"Thief! swindler! old hag! Turn the old devil out! hand her over to the police! Search her bedding: you might find a lot more stuff in it!" In short, they all came straight out with anything they felt like saying.

Granny's shrieking suddenly stopped. Her tears dried up, her head drooped, and she stood there stunned and speechless She passed that night sitting on her haunches, her hands grasping her knees, rocking backwards and forwards, her body shaken by dry sobbing, lamenting and calling the names of now her mother and father, now her husband, now her daughter Bismillah, and her grand-daughter Tiny. Every now and then, just for a moment, she would doze, then wake with a cry, as though ants were stinging an old sore. At times she would laugh and cry hysterically, at times talk to herself, then suddenly, for no reason, break into a smile. Then out of the darkness some old recollection would hurl its spear at her, and like a sick dog howling in a half human voice, she would rouse the whole *muhalla* with her cries. Two days passed in this way, and the people of the *muhalla* gradually began to feel sorry for what they had done. After all, no one had the slightest need of any of these things. They had disappeared years ago, and though there had been weeping and wailing over them at the time, they had long since been forgotten. It was just that they themselves were no millionaires, and sometimes on such occasions a mere straw weighs down upon you like a great beam. But the loss of these things had not killed them. Shabban's quilted jacket had long since lost any ability to grapple with the cold, and he couldn't stop himself growing up while he waited for it to be found. Hasina had long felt she was past the age for wearing a bodice. Of what use to Munni were her doll's baggy trousers? She had long passed the stage of playing with dolls and graduated to toy cooking-pots. *AND EDUCATION* of the people of the *muhalla* were out for Granny's blood.

In olden days there lived a giant. This giant's life was in a big black bee. Across the seven seas in a cave there was a big chest, and in it another chest, and inside that was a little box, in which there was a big black bee. A brave prince came

....and first he tore off one of the bee's legs, and by the power of the spell, one of the giant's legs broke. Then the prince broke another leg, and the giant's other leg broke. And then he crushed the bee, and the giant died.

Granny's life was in the pillow, and the monkey had torn the enchanted pillow with his teeth, and so thrust a red-hot iron bar into Granny's heart.

There was no sorrow in the world, no humiliation, no disgrace, which Fate had not brought to Granny. When her husband died, and her bangles were broken¹, Granny had thought she had not many more days to live; when Bismillah was wrapped in her shroud, she had felt certain that this was the last straw on the camel's back. And when Tiny brought disgrace upon her and ran away, Granny had thought that this was the death-blow.

From the day of her birth onwards, every conceivable illness had assailed her. Small-pox had left its marks upon her face. Every year at some festival she would contract severe diarrhoea.

Her fingers were worn to the bone by years of cleaning up other people's filth, and she had scoured pots and pans until her hands were all pitted and marked. Some time every year she would fall down the stairs in the dark, take to her bed for a day or two, and then start dragging herself about again. In her last birth Granny must surely have been a dog-tick; that's why she was so hard to kill. It seemed as though death always gave her a wide berth. She'd wander about with her clothes hanging in tatters, but she would never accept the clothes of anyone who had died, nor even let them come into contact with her. The dead person might have hidden death in the seams to jump out and grab the delicately-nurtured Granny. Who could have imagined that in the end it would be the monkeys who would settle her account? Early in the morning, when the water-carrier came with his water-skin, he saw that Granny was sitting on her haunches on the stairs. Her mouth was open, and flies were crawling in the corners of her half-closed eyes. People had often seen Granny asleep just like this, and had feared she was dead. But Granny had always started up, cleared her

¹As a sign of widowhood.

throat and spat out the phlegm, and poured out a shower of abuse on the person who had disturbed her. But that day Granny remained sitting on her haunches on the stairs. Fixed in death, she showered continuous abuse upon the world. Her whole life through, she had never known a moment's ease, and wherever she had laid herself down there had been thorns. Granny was shrouded just as she was, squatting on her haunches. Her body had set fast, and no amount of pulling and tugging could straighten it.

On judgment Day the trumpet sounded, and Granny woke with a start and got up coughing and clearing her throat, as though her ears had caught the sound of free food being doled out.... Cursing and swearing at the angels, she dragged herself somehow or other, doubled up as she was, over the Bridge of Sirat¹ and burst into the presence of God the All-Powerful and All-Kind....and God, beholding the degradation of humanity, bowed his head in shame and wept tears of blood. And those divine tears of blood fell upon Granny's rough grave, and bright red poppies sprang up there and began to dance in the breeze.

*Translated from original Urdu
by RALPH RUSSELL.*

¹In Muslim belief, a bridge thin as a hair and sharp as a sword, over which the true believer must pass to enter Paradise.

NOTES ON AUTHORS

LAXMINATH BEZBOROA (1868-1938) : Poet, essayist, short story writer and one of the most versatile of Assamese authors. Author of *Kadam Kali* (poetry); *Jaymati Kuvamri* and *Beli-mar* (dramas); *Jon-bibi* and *Surabhi* (short stories); *Barbaruvar Bhabar Burburani* (humour and satire); *Sankardev*, etc.

PRABHAT KUMAR MUKHOPADHYAY (1873-1932) : Probably the best known writer of short stories in Bengali after Rabindranath Tagore. His short stories are collected in more than a dozen volumes, of which some are: *Navakatha*, *Patrapushpa*, *Jamata Babaji*, *Deshi o Bilati*, *Gahanar Baksha*, etc.

BHABANI BHATTACHARYA (b. 1906) : One of the best known Indian novelists in English. Author of *So Many Hungers*, *Music for Mohini*, *He who rides a Tiger* and *Shadow from Ladakh*. Some of his novels have been translated in many Indian and more than a dozen European languages.

'DHUMKETU', the nom-de-plume of Gaurishanker Govardhandas Joshi (1892-1965) : A leading short story writer and one of the veterans of Gujarati literature. Has published more than 45 books some of which are: *Chouladevi* (novel); *Pagadandi* (travel); *Jivan-rang* (autobiography); *Pangoshthi* (satire); *Padagha* (drama); *Hemachandracharya* (life sketches); *Tankha*, 4 Vols. (short stories), etc.

PREM CHAND (1880-1936) : The greatest novelist and short story writer in Hindi. Author of *Sahitya ka Uddesya* (criticism); *Kuchh Vichar* (essays); *Rangabhumi*, *Sevasadan*, *Nirmala*, *Kayakalpa*, *Premashram*, *Ghaban* and *Godan* (novels); several collections of short stories, etc.

MASTI VENKATESA IYENGAR (b. 1891) : Distinguished Kannada novelist, short story writer and essayist. Author of *Malara* (poems); *Sanna Kathegalu*, 11 Vols. (short stories); *Yasodhara* (play); *Chenna Basava Nayaka*, *Chika Vira Rajendra* (novels), etc.

AKHTAR MOHI-UD-DIN (*b.* 1928) : Distinguished Kashmiri author. His volume of short stories, *Sat Sangar* received the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1958. Author of *Dod Dag* which is considered the first novel written and published in Kashmiri.

POONKUNNAM VARKEY (*b.* 1910) : Distinguished poet and short story writer in Malayalam. Among the twenty books published by him are : *Thirumulkazhcha* (poems); *Vikarasadanam* (short stories); *Premaviplavam* (play); *Tulikachitrangal* (pen-pictures), etc.

'**ROOP KATTHAK**', the nom-de-plume of P.S. Rege (*b.* 1910) : Marathi poet, critic and short story writer. Edited 'Chhanda.' Author of *Phulora*, *Gandha-rekha*, *Gatha* (poetry); *Roop Katthak* (short stories); *Ranga Panchalik* (plays); *Savitri*, *Avalokita* (novels).

KALINDICHARAN PANIGRAHI (*b.* 1901) : Distinguished novelist, short story writer and poet in Oriya. Author of *Matira Manish* (novel); *Piyadassi* (drama); *Mane nahin* (poetry); *Khyaniyka Satya* (poetry); *Netritva o Netritva* (essays); *Sesha Rashmi* (short stories), etc.

KARTAR SINGH DUGGAL (*b.* 1917) : Distinguished short story writer in Punjabi. His collection of short stories, *Ik Chhit Chanandi*, received the Sahitya Akademi Award for 1965. Author of *Savar Sar* and *Larrai Nahin* (short stories); *Andran* (novel); *Sat Natak* and *Puranian Bottan* (plays); *Kandhe Kandhe* (poetry), etc.

AMARLAL HINGORANI (1907-1957) : Well-known short story writer in Sindhi. Outstanding among his stories are *Ram ain Rahim*, *Goli-jo-Gunah*, *Bhaoo* and *Hee bi Ranjhoo Sandee Ramz*.

C. RAJAGOPALACHARI (*b.* 1879) : One of the elder statesmen of India, is also one of the foremost writers in Tamil. Author of *Vyasar Virundu*; *Chakravarti Tirumagan* (renderings of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* respectively); *Ramakrishna Upanishadam* (philosophy); *Atmachintanai* (Meditations of Marcus Aurelius); *Karpanaikkadu* (new fables), etc.

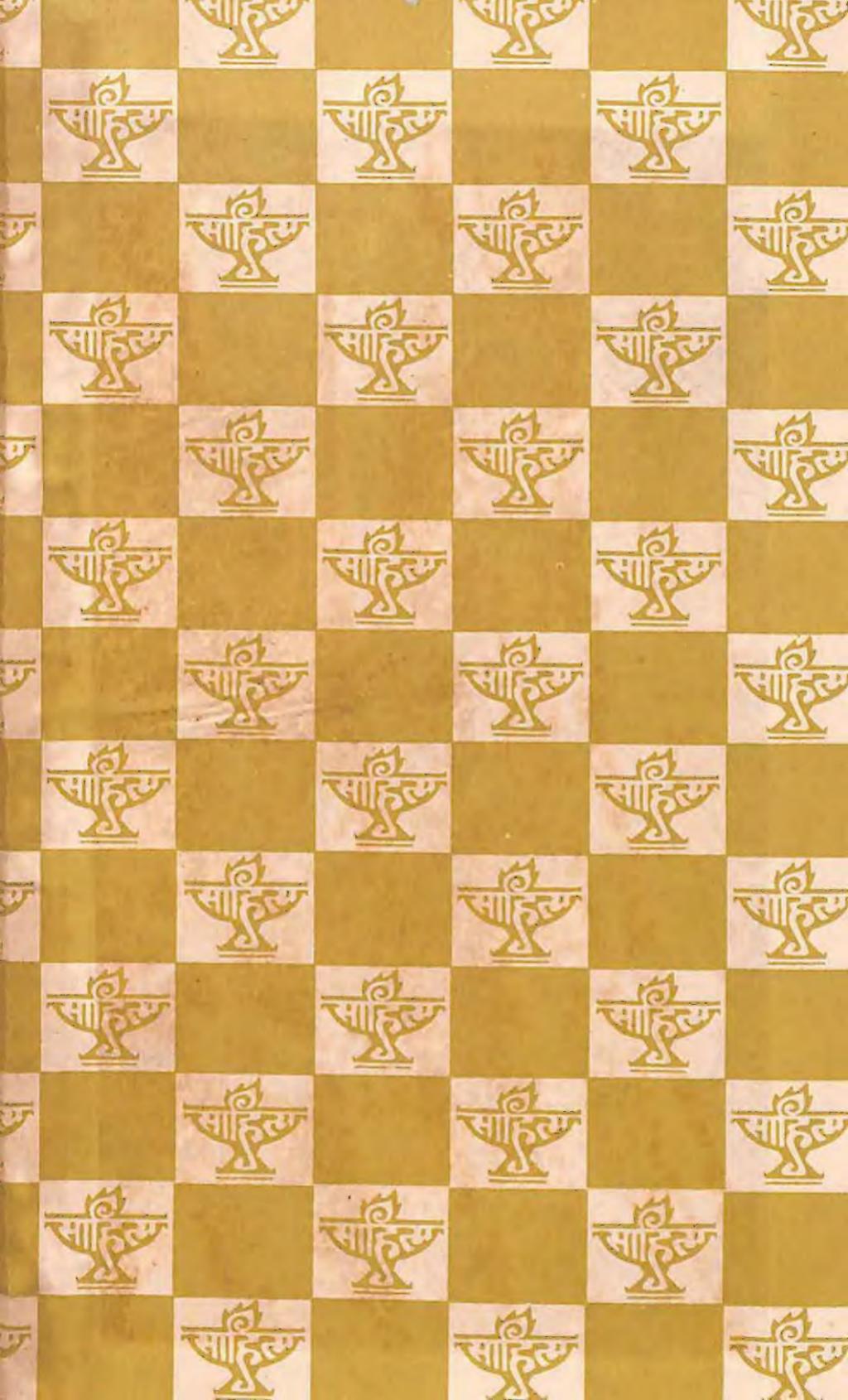
P. PADMARAJU (*b.* 1915) : Distinguished short story writer and dramatist in Telugu. His short story 'The Cyclone' was awarded

the second prize in the World Competition conducted by the 'New York Herald Tribune' in 1952. *Padmaraju Kathalu* and *Kooli Janam* are some of his important works.

ISMAT CHUGHTAI (SMT.) : A leading short story writer in Urdu and one of the most gifted contemporary women-writers. Her collections of short stories include: *Choten*, *Chhui Mui*, *Kaliyan Shaitan* (short stories). She has also written novels like *Ziddi*.







This sheaf of fifteen short stories represents a cross-section of contemporary Indian literature. Fourteen of them are translations one each from fourteen modern languages of India, one is a specimen of Indian creative writing in English.

These stories provide fascinating glimpses into the panorama of Indian life, with its baffling variety, its rich contrasts wherein the simple and the sophisticated, the ancient and the modern jostle against one another. Here is evidence, if such were needed, that Indian literature is one though written in many languages—its oneness not of a stale uniformity but of a rich variety.

This is the first of a series of such representative anthologies of contemporary Indian short story. A second volume of 22 stories written by different authors, mainly during the period 1930-1950, is also available.